

To See Ourselves

Psychological Insight in Perspective

I had a professor at the University of Chicago by the name of Bruno Bettelheim. He was an interesting, cantankerous person. He taught a course on the “Theory of Group Work” in which we analyzed things like street gangs and bridge clubs and church groups. He would brilliantly dissect the motivations that brought different people into these groups. I think I was 30 years old at the time, and it was the first time I grasped the idea that people do things for different motivations, and that you could get lot farther with them, if you could figure out what those motivations were.

At the time I guess I was one of those people who only looked at the surface of things. Or maybe it was that I was so absorbed in my own life that there was no room in my life for figuring out other people.

Bettelheim learned a lot from being in a concentration camp, and he applied it in the treatment of autistic children by setting up a very controlled environment to care for them. Much of what he thought and did would subsequently be discredited. Still, I think about his class as a turning point (or starting point) in my own thinking about human behavior.

By the time we get to be a manager or leader of some kind we are supposed to have figured ourselves out sufficiently so we can focus our attention on trying to figure other people out. But the truth is that all of our lives are a constant quest for understanding—

not only to come to some sense of others, but also to come to some sense about who we really are. Throughout a long lifetime, we continue to be surprised—by how people see us, by how we react to discussions about which we thought we were indifferent (think of the animated discussions in many households that swirled on around the Democratic candidates in the Spring of 2008), and by what happens when we take an action with someone and are surprised by their reaction to what we've said or done.

So, the quest for self-understanding goes on throughout life and forms the basis for how we look at and understand others. It is also important to understanding that no test, no interview, no evaluation completely captures one's personality. None of us comes with a simple set of descriptors that says everything about us.

We also know today—because of the extensive work on human genetics--that there is a lot more “nature” than “nurture” in our make up than was previously thought. Our personalities have the looks, quirks and foibles of our ancestors buried deep in our genes.

Above the back stairs in our house we have a set of pictures. They start with my great grandfather who came from England or Ireland by way of Nova Scotia and landed in California in the mid 1850s to search for gold. Then there are my parents' mothers and fathers and assorted uncles, aunts and old family friends.

My dad's father dropped his real name--and quite possibly some jail time--when he moved from New York City to Buffalo in the early 1900's. He worked as a school janitor in Buffalo but was able to set up one daughter in business and take another, his favorite, on regular trips to Ireland on a janitor's salary. What the real story was about good old grandpa's money got lost in the Irish family code of silence and the death of my last aunt. Perhaps the "nurture" part of your own life is less extreme, but most people have had branches on the family tree that needed pruning, hiding or sheltering. What do we inherit? About 50% of our traits--most of them physical. Nonetheless, when you are around the O'Briens, watch your wallets.

Anyway, when I go up the stairs and look at these people, I wonder what aspects of their souls—their looks and outlooks, their values, their views on life—continue to shape mine.

We have all worked for people who didn't have much insight into their behavior. Either they weren't interested or had formed a glorious picture of themselves in their minds they didn't care to disturb ("mirror, mirror on the wall") or were so frightened that they wouldn't take an honest look for fear of what they'd see. Working for such people is no picnic.

The goal of much of what we do as organizational psychologists is to help people get the tools to know themselves well enough so that they don't end up being unaware. You can build a business with obtuse or ignorant people in leadership positions, but one

rarely builds an enduring franchise. That's why self-reflection and feedback are so important. That's why 360° assessment is so valuable. That's why good leaders are always in search of self-understanding.

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