THINKING FOR YOURSELF

Last week, I had a scary and humbling experience that brought into focus what an amazing gift it is to have access, always, to simple wisdom, regardless of how much other thinking we engage. And to know that we’re always thinking our own thoughts and that our experience can only come from our own thoughts.

It helped me to see, more clearly than ever before, how close at hand wisdom is and how readily we can override it with thinking that doesn’t make sense, but nonetheless creates a compelling experience. It helped me to see more clearly how quickly and easily our thoughts change and how everything in our experience changes with them.

Last Monday morning, I got going especially early to take my car to Pittsburgh for a minor repair. As I was leaving the house, without breakfast or coffee because I didn’t want to take the time to eat, I had the thought that I really should stop for breakfast and maybe even cancel the drive to Pittsburgh because I was still really tired from a long trip over the weekend. It occurred to me to take the morning off and rest and go to Pittsburgh some other day. Nothing was urgent about the repair. I could call and cancel it.

Those ideas made sense to me and I hesitated, but then I immediately thought that I had promised to get the car to the dealer, I had an appointment, I had been away from work for more than a week and I needed to get back to work as soon as I could. I could pick up coffee along the way. I came up with a bunch of schedule-driven reasons in my own mind why I should just go and gut it out.

I went. I didn’t stop for coffee because the weather was bad and I was running late. I sat in the car dealership for about an hour waiting for my car, and I didn’t go anywhere for breakfast because I had brought work to do and I needed to make some phone calls. I got a machine cup of coffee at the dealership; it came with sugary flavoring. When I left the car dealership, I told myself I would stop for breakfast before I drove back to Morgantown, but it was raining pretty hard and I was still running later than I had hoped.

As I passed several restaurants before getting back on the highway, I kept having the idea that I really should stop. I kept contradicting it with the fact that I’d just had a cup of sweet vanilla something-or-other and it would keep me going and it would be quicker to stop to get something back in Morgantown.

About two-thirds of the way home, the sugar high turned to a low. I started yawning. I was really fighting to stay awake. It dawned on me that I should stop and walk around or something. But it was raining. I told myself I could make it. I cranked up the radio and kept on going. By this time, I actually felt that I was at war within myself because every
instant that I stopped making up reasons why I needed to keep hurrying on back, the idea that I should not be driving came to mind. “Get hold of yourself!” I told myself. “You can make it back to Morgantown. It’s only a few miles now.”

Not far from Morgantown, I felt shocked and panic-stricken as I became aware that I was hurtling through a ditch on the other side of the road. I had fallen asleep at the wheel, crossed the lanes, and skidded into a ditch. Hitting the ditch woke me up. I wasn’t going that fast; there was no traffic; I easily got control of the car and stopped. A passing motorist slowed and looked at me to see if I needed help. I waved him on, got out and looked for damage (there was none), walked around a bit, and then, wide awake and still breathless from the experience and all of its implications, I drove the rest of the way.

It was the first time in my life I had ever fallen asleep at the wheel. I knew how fortunate and blessed I was that I did not hurt anyone else, or myself. Most importantly, I recognized that if I had acted on the helpful thinking that had been coming constantly to mind from the moment I started to leave my house, this would not have happened.

The first learning for me was how easily I could impose reasons totally fabricated from pressure or importance that I was making up in my own head to drown out ordinary, useful insights. As soon as I forced myself to keep thinking of those artificial reasons, my experience of reality became rushed and ridiculously self-sacrificing. I made up my own crazy ideas about how important it was for me to get somewhere, and then get somewhere else. Who else in the world cared? What difference would it make in the whole scheme of my life?

The second lesson came that evening. The whole incident had disappeared from my mind for the rest of the day because my attention turned to the tasks at hand. But that evening, at home, it replayed in my mind. The scenario came back and I started thinking again how fortunate I was not to have hurt anyone else and to have escaped uninjured myself, my car intact. I was filled with gratitude that I could have learned something important without doing any harm. I was overwhelmed with appreciation for the gift of life. I was thrilled to recall that I did have useful, helpful and responsive thinking all along the way and that I could learn the value and wonder of that anew and learn to back off completely from the kind of intensity and urgency created by ignoring my common sense. I had an important insight: I totally trust my own wisdom and intuition and the value of calm and internal quietude in big-picture matters in my life, such as teaching and work projects, but I routinely override it in the small details of infrastructure, such as over-promising time commitments and then making myself stay on schedule and doing too many things that don’t really matter. I saw how simple it would be to change that – to apply the same standards of well-being across the board in my life.

Then I started thinking how stupid I had been and thinking that I had no business trying to help other people learn about not being stressed and living from a calm state of mind.
when I had completely forsaken everything I knew just to get my car to a service appointment and get back to work on some dumb artificial schedule. The gratitude disappeared and I was suddenly floundering in a morass of self-criticism and what-if’s. What if I had killed someone? What if I had killed myself? Why didn’t I listen to my own best judgment? I must be a really bad person. I don’t deserve all the wonderful chances I’ve had in life. If people knew how awful I was, everything would be taken away from me. Instantly, I was mired in misery.

Within the space of less than five minutes, I had plummeted from experiencing the heights of gratitude, appreciation and learning from life to experiencing the depths of self-loathing, hopelessness and fear of what could happen in life. And all that drama took place within my own mind, as I was sitting quietly in my living room by the fireplace.

It has been a long time since I can remember feeling that horrible. I didn’t like the feeling at all. And this is where the second lesson occurred.

I saw that the elation and the depression were both temporary illusions of my own creation. The incident was over. Whatever there was to be learned could be learned through reflection, in a neutral state of mind. I had no choice but to ride the rollercoaster of my own feelings once I started dwelling on the details of the incident and looking for personal meaning beyond the simple truth of my good fortune and the renewed lesson of listening to my own common sense. But I didn’t have to buy another ticket for the ride.

It was quite clear to me that I had actually re-engaged my old habit of overriding common sense, which was showing me what there was to learn, with detailed personal thinking, which was dragging me into a useless spiral of negativity. Just as quickly and as seemingly rationally as I had originally put aside the intelligent notion that I was too tired to cram a long drive to Pittsburgh into last Monday morning, I had put aside the intelligent notion that I should quiet down and “listen” to the insightful ideas that were bringing me peace and new knowledge last Monday evening. Instead of relaxing into deeper learning about life, I had started thinking about myself and trying to make some personal meaning from it. Within a millisecond, once I engaged that personal thinking, my experience changed from ease and comfort to stress and discomfort.

The near-miss of falling asleep at the wheel wasn’t making me one way or the other. It had frightened me, then resolved itself, in a few minutes’ time that morning. Now, it was only a memory. How I was thinking about that memory was making my experiences that evening. Thinking about that memory had occupied less than a quarter hour of my life, yet it had generated both the most beautiful and the most dreadful states of mind and corresponding experiences I could remember having for a long time.

How simple that is! In that brief time, everything I’ve learned about the power of thought and the fact that we are always thinking for ourselves and creating our own experience
displayed itself in bold and vivid strokes. That may have been the first time in my life I had actually fallen asleep at the wheel, but it certainly was not the first time I had fallen asleep to the fundamental truth that wisdom is the greatest gift in life, when we open it.

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