

Pathways

THE CHRIS DEWEY PROFESSIONAL SERVICES LLC. NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 6

FALL 2013



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“No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half-asleep in the dawning of your knowledge”

Kahlil Gilbran

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Learning by Stages

There is a process to learning, about which I have spoken before. What I am discovering, however, is that there is also a link between the stages of learning, the stresses and fears we face along the way, and their ability to affect our willingness to change course.

As creatures designed to learn new information, we go through four very distinct stages of learning.

At the first stage we don't know that we don't know something. We are clueless, innocent, naive and blind. At this stage of the process we are an **uninformed or unconscious incompetent**...we simply don't know that we don't know.

At the second stage we enter a very vulnerable stage of learning. In the second stage we become acutely aware that we don't know something, and that others do. We enter the world of the **informed or conscious incompetent**. At this stage of learning we are building foundational knowledge, and creating contexts and relationships to learn something new. At this stage we can sometimes question our ability to learn at the same time as we are excited to be learning something new. We can become susceptible to the forces of frustration, which can manifest in lots of different ways according to our energy levels.

At the third level, we become competent and we know it. We become a

confident competent. It can also be the stage of arrogance, because we think we are pretty darned good at something. At this stage we can also assimilate large amounts of data because we have a foundation and a structure upon which to hang more information. Often we have a thirst for learning more, and feel good about our abilities. Additionally, at this stage we may like to share what we are learning, and yet we may be unaware that there is yet another level.

The fourth level of learning is the **unconscious competent**. When you meet an unconscious competent doing what they do, you know it right away. You are in the presence of a master of what they do. What they do is so much a part of who they are, that they don't even think about how to do it anymore.

Interestingly, just before this stage some people change course. For some people, the spice is in the challenge, and when something is no longer a challenge, they get bored and seek new challenges.

So what does all this have to do with stress, fear and a willingness to change course?

After thirty-plus years of teaching geology and martial arts, I have seen this thing play itself out so many times in so many ways. Now, as I put myself back into the role of the student, I can feel it play itself out in my own life.

Still Learning

I'll admit it...right now, I am an **informed incompetent**. I know that I know nothing about Traditional Chinese Medicine. I have entered the stage of building a foundation for a new knowledge set, and it brings to the surface all my fears, doubts, and concerns, as well as providing huge amounts of joy and excited anticipation. When I entered this program, I knew I was filling a void in my knowledge base, but although I was aware that there was a body of knowledge that I wanted to acquire, I did not know the actual size of the void. It's H-U-G-E!

As a martial artist, I already knew a little bit about some key concepts, but that was about it. As a geologist, I was a trained scientist, and as a palaeontologist I had been trained in understanding biological systems across time. All of this was a foundation of sorts, but at very real level, what I know is exactly that...stuff I already know.

What I already knew provided a limited context, but it does not inform me concerning the new field of inquiry.

I am in uncharted territory, and uncharted territory contains unseen dangers and pitfalls, as well as magnificent new vistas and beauties that I had not imagined. It is in this territory that we face our inner demons of

doubt and fear. Am I good enough? Can I do this? Am I bright enough? We all know the questions, we are all familiar with them in some way, shape or form.

You can, however, take the idea beyond learning as I am talking about it here (in the sense of academic achievement) and apply it to entering a new relationship or a making a new career move; the concepts still apply. So it is at the second stage of learning, that we are most vulnerable to the possibility of a course change. Our ability to stay the course comes from that belief that in the face of uncertainty and doubt there is a sense of inner trust. It is the quiet inner voice that reminds us why took the path of the pioneer into a new world of learning and experience. Like most pioneers, we envisage some payoff at the end of the process.

And therein lies the trap...if we cease to believe that the effort required does not balance out in the payoff at the end, we are most likely to change course when we are still an **informed incompetent**. The course change comes with statements like "It's just not worth it to me."

It's just like leaving home and thinking about all the good things you left behind and then wishing you had all of them again. From the perspective of "It's just not worth it", the dis-

tance and the perceived obstacles between where we are and where we want to be are just too great emotionally, intellectually, physically, or financially, so we decide to take a different path.

Unfortunately, it is precisely at this stage that we DON'T see the finished product, or that we will indeed emerge from this stage and enter the stage of the **confident competent**.

And that is not to imply that it's like a "one day you aren't and the next day you are" kind of thing. The transition is often cyclic. You can acquire **confident competence** in one area of your new knowledge and then step into a sub-area of informed incompetence at the same time.

If you can recognize this stage and its transition for what it is, then it keeps you humble and hungry.

We can live in this stage for years and years.

At the top end of the third stage is the second major threshold for incurring course changes. What motivates this particular course change is the idea of learning nothing new. If we enter a landscape where everything looks the same, we can get bored...after all, humans like change. Once we entertain the question of "Is this it?" What we are really saying is that we are hungry for something new to stimulate our interest. It is at this stage that

"In seeking knowledge, the first step is silence"

Solomon Ibn Gabirol

Not Done Learning Yet

some people will leave the field of study, or their job or their relationship and seek something new. They will never enter the world of the skilled master.

The skilled master is the one who truly understands that whatever he or she knows, it is nothing compared to what is possible. The skilled master is the quiet, unassuming, humble reservoir of knowledge. Unfortunately it takes a lifetime of dedication to get there, and few of us are willing to do that.

So let's bring back fear and stress for a minute. What is it about entering the stage of the **unconscious competent** that leads to stress or awakens our fears? I wonder if it has something to do with the fear of responsibility? Could it be related to a fear of ultimate success? Could it be the fear of stagnation? Could it have something to do with the fear of missing out on something new? After all one of the things that motivates learning is that the human spirit thirsts for new experiences and discovery.

Hey, let's be honest, it's one of the reasons I am here in the first place. I recognized a void in my life and wanted to fill it. For me, being here in Traditional Chinese Medicine, is, however, complimentary to me as a geologist and as a martial artist. Neither are complete without this knowledge. Say what??

If Traditional Chinese Medicine signposts us to anything, it is to a sense of balance, and of homeostasis. We have become managers of the planet and its resources, and by most accounts we're not really doing a great job at it. Now

do you see my link between TCM and acquiring a deeper understanding the Earth? Equally, as a martial artist I am all about learning how to use energy and maintain my own balance while perturbing that of my training partner. Learning martial arts is about an energy exchange and a search for inner as well as outer balance.

For me, the journey is about balance in all its guises.

But I digress...each of us is on a journey of some sort through life. What is it that you want to discover? What are you willing to do to discover it? What price are you willing to pay to get there?

Each of us enters life as an **uninformed incompetent** (we can argue the relative truths of that one in a different newsletter), and we progress through the various stage of learning at different times and in different ways. Fact of the matter is though, we will go through each of these stages of learning multiple times in our lives

Assuming that the process of learning is unavoidable to a large degree, it all comes down to managing the process. What stressors exist for you in the learning process? How do they impact your learning? What do you want to do about that?

If you can understand that your inner demons are at their loudest and strongest when you are in the stage of the **informed incompetent**, and a different set of inner voices emerge once you enter the stage of the **confident competent**, then management becomes much easier.

If I know that I will face my inner fears of not being good enough, bright

enough, strong enough, rich enough, good-looking enough or fill-in-the-blank enough when I enter the stage of the **informed incompetent**, I have choices. I can listen to those voices and walk away to something different, or hide in what I already know, or I can silence those voices as I negotiate my path through the new landscape and acquire the skills of an experienced pioneer and explorer. I can choose to embrace the idea that I am seeking to reach for my highest potential, and am willing to remove my own energy blocks along the way.

I guarantee you that you will pass into the territory of the **confident competent**. If you stay the course thereafter with humility, then the world of the master opens to you. There are beacons for all of us, when we feel as though we are drowning in a new area of learning, or when we feel like we don't have the ability or the skill set necessary. There are beacons for us when we move into the higher levels of learning.

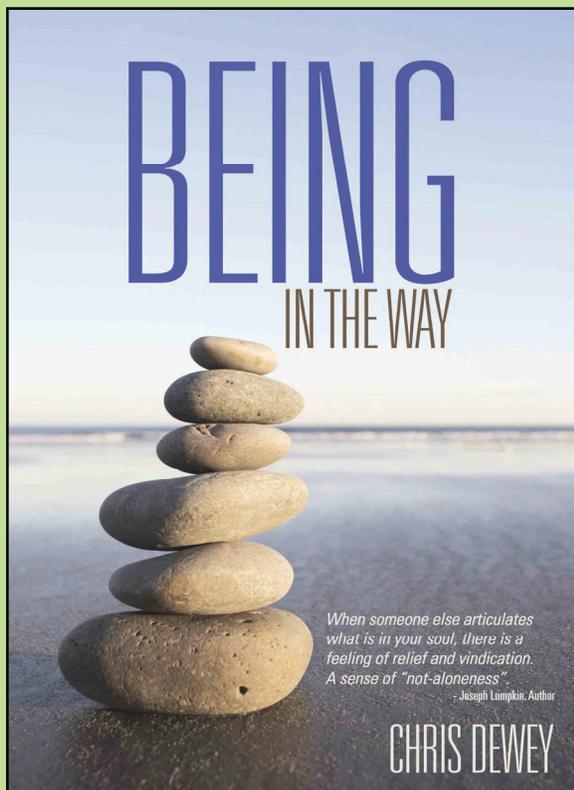
Learning new things is an ongoing process of life...after all I have no idea what the next moment holds for me...it's all an adventure into the unknown. We are then, after all, uninformed when it comes to stepping into the future. The lesson of the master rings true...the cup is always empty. What do you want to put in in your cup? How do you wish to step into the future?

What gifts does learning have for you? And how do those gifts impact your ability to play the game of life full out, at your highest potential? ☺

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For Martial Arts Instructors

