

Pathways

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Be kind. Every person you meet is fighting a hard battle

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On perspectives...again

A cow stands in a field and eats grass all day. The cow thinks that this is the purpose of its life. There is a sort of benign neglect involved on the part of the farmer. The cow is left to eat grass and the farmer allows it do just that. The day that the cow is taken to market comes as a huge surprise to the cow, but not to the farmer or the butcher. (Thanks to Bertrand Russell for the variation on a theme).

It's all about perspective.

A lot of times we live our lives like the cow, occasionally we get to view life as a farmer.

More often than not, we take the way our lives are going for granted and then some event causes our lives to change direction. I can look at several events in my own life that came as something of a surprise to me, but perhaps to those who were watching my life at the time, there was an inevitable quality about what transpired.

I see this in my students on campus. I watch them come to class (or not), I watch them study (or not), and it does not come as much of a surprise to me when I see the grades that they earn at the end of the semester. For some of them, however, the grade comes as a massive surprise.

I've spoken about this before, the idea that financial advisors tell us that previous behavior of the stock market is no indicator of its future behavior....and of course they are exactly right, but that's not how we invest our hard-earned capital. We invest as though there will always be at least a 10% return on investment on average, because that what the stock market has always done, on average. The

point here, is that what we know, does not allow us to predict what will happen in the future. Based on its previous experiences, the cow believes that eating grass is the purpose of its life. Life is not always predictable, but what we do with what we know and what we do about what we *don't* know, will, in large part, affect how we deal with the unforeseen events of life.

I think that this comes back to Judo..

When you are doing free practice with a partner and attempting to throw them, much of the action is entirely predictable and largely obvious both to the players (cows) and the observers (farmers). It is only when something massively unpredictable happens to one of the cows (but not the farmers or the other cow) that someone gets thrown. Judo happens because one of the players believed in something that *didn't* happen. One of the players put complete faith in the ability to put weight upon a foot and that the planet would be there waiting for them. Well...it was, but not in the sense that the player had predicted. It wasn't what he or she knew that got them thrown, it was what he or she *didn't* know.

Every time I step I expect the planet to support my weight and I expect my foot to be the balance point for my body....when either of these things do not transpire as expected, I fall over.

It's not about what I know, it's about what I don't know. More importantly, it's about the perspective that I take about my life that makes the difference. So, are we cows or farmers?

☺

On self defense

My wife and I recently taught a self-defense class for women. This is not an easy thing to do. Teaching self-defense is like attempting to take something hugely unpredictable, potentially life-altering (or ending), generally traumatizing and attempting to make it a class-room-friendly event.

Defending yourself against a would-be attacker in the confines of a classroom event is not the same thing as doing it on the street.

I recall years ago, going to a club after class and having a post-work out re-hydration event. There were several of us there, including the lead instructor at the time. I was a white belt in Taekwondo at the time and we had just finished a sparring class. So there we were (probably not in the best environment around), but nonetheless there we were. One of the students (at the time a black belt candidate) got into an argument with one of the locals and things went bad...quickly. The student settled back into a fighting stance and the offended local patron simply broke the bottle from which he was drinking and so the fight began. What became stunningly obvious within seconds was that the student was point sparring! The guy with the bottle was out for blood and the student was looking around for the referee to award points for the round kicks that he was not quite landing!!

I learned a lot of lessons that night, almost twenty-five years ago, that have stayed with me to this day.

1. Self-defense is as much about over-arching life strategy, attitude of mind and environmental choice as it is about tactics.
2. Your mind and body always go

home. Whether or not it is appropriate to do so.

3. You are massively blind to what you don't know.
4. There are no rules in real world self-defense, despite what we do in the classroom
5. You don't know what you think you know.

When we teach self-defense we can make the lesson palatable by talking about adrenaline stress response, attacker's initiative, adversarial psychology, the four A's, three R's and three D's of self-defense as though they were classroom lectures in a syllabus to be delivered to the student. And of course, there is a degree of merit in this. But in reality, if our students do not get to experience adrenaline stress response (for instance) in the classroom and begin to understand its implications, then we are not really teaching self-defense.

There is a very fine line in the classroom between learning and reality. One of the things that a self-defense class needs to do is to help prepare students in much the same way as we treat allergies by giving small doses of the allergen to build up immunity.

By exposing a student to higher levels of adrenaline stress response, we can get past (or at least being to prepare for) some of what happens during a malignant encounter.

More importantly, the skills we teach in a self-defense class are not the ones we would necessarily teach in a martial arts class.

One of the great traps of learning martial arts is that we think we are learning self-defense skills that have direct application to the street. As our student in the earlier exam-

ple so amply demonstrated to me, nothing could be further from the street.

It is easy to delude ourselves that the martial skills we learn are directly applicable, but the real world doesn't care about well-executed kicks or perfectly balanced throws, or torque circles in joint locks.

The real world only cares about who walks away.

There are some very sobering lessons in here.

1. The classroom is not a substitute for the real world
2. What we learn in theoretical pursuits may have no foundation in reality
3. The classroom is a safe house for learning in a benign setting.
4. The real world is the final arbiter of true learning...put another way, experience is the best teacher.

So when I teach self-defense classes I am very much aware that I have spent a good deal of my life avoiding situations in which I have to defend myself. First rule of self-defense: Don't be there! Second rule of self-defense: If rule one fails and you are there, be there! Third rule of self-defense: If rule two applies, end the engagement as quickly and safely as possible.

I know this article doesn't fit the normal run of articles in Pathways, but these thoughts have been with me for a while since we taught the last self-defense class and while I don't train in the martial arts so that I can defend myself, there is a component of that in everything that we do in class. What is important to recognize though, is the difference between the classroom and the real world. ☺

Struggle and Pattern Recognition

One of the hardest things to do as an instructor is to stand aside and watch a student struggle either physically or mentally. The nature of life and the path to black belt, however, both require that the path to learning will almost invariably involve some pitfalls.

Being a mentor or an instructor does not involve solving the problems of the student so much as guiding them towards finding their own solutions. Truly gifted mentors do these things in such a way that the student doesn't even realize that he or she received any assistance along the way. I only aspire to such levels of wisdom.

Again I turn to Judo for my lessons. I cannot stop you from falling over, but I can teach you to fall with grace, acquire greater balance and to fall less often (metaphorically or in reality). Indeed, if you truly wish to learn Judo, then you must by necessity learn how to fall.

Obviously there are lessons here. The physical message translates directly to the mental path. What we resist in our bodies is often first resisted in the mind.

So where does this resistance come from?

Sometimes I think our personal resistances come from our inability to simply observe what is, without prejudice (from experience), without judgement (from comparison) and without bias (from personal preference). Part of it is the ability to think 'outside of the box'. Everytime we experience some event, we ascribe to it a meaning, which will then color all similar events...it's almost a default position of the brain.

Perhaps the default position goes back to pure survival instincts, but wherever its roots, the irreducible position is that it is extraordinarily hard for any of us to experience any

kind of event in our lives without attributing to it some form of interpretation and therefore a meaning.

This is not entirely a bad thing; but it is useful to become aware of the process at work. It takes a much greater level of effort to experience something in your life and NOT give it an interpretation, but sometimes the ability to NOT interpret can provide completely novel insights into our lives and worlds.

For instance, if I learned a lesson about trusting strangers as a child and carried that lesson through to adulthood, it might serve me well or it might hold me back, depending upon the nature of the lesson.

What is more significant is that I might be completely unaware of what I am doing: I might meet someone in my work situation and *instinctively* not trust them, but have no idea of why; conversely I might automatically trust them without realizing why. Either situation could be good or bad, but notice that it is the interpretation that I put on the meeting that will control all my interactions with that person thereafter.

Suppose now, for a moment that I am able to do an end run around that interpretative part of the meeting event and simply look at this new person who enters my work life without any form of judgement. Am I any better off? I guess that depends upon how things unfold; I do at least have a more objective basis for how we will interact as time goes by. I can then choose an interpretation based upon the facts of the work relationship purely on their own merit, not on some previously established subjective criteria.

In short, I can see the possibility of something novel, because my mind is not trapped by its previous

conditioning. I can see trees and not just the forest. I can see opportunity because I am not constrained by practice. I can see something new because I am not trapped by pattern recognition.

And this is what it all comes back to: Pattern recognition. Humans are pattern seekers. We build huge databases from all our experiences and we put everything into its appropriate box according to the pattern it exhibits. So, over time our brains develop both abilities to see opportunity in some settings and risk in others. Where we see risk or threat we tend to become resistant, where we see opportunity we tend to become more willing to experiment.

It is precisely for these reasons that it is so difficult for mentors and instructors to avoid the desire to rush in and fix things. It is also why the help provided must be almost invisible and why it is so critical for students to discover their own truths.

Excellent teachers allow students to learn for themselves, to discover truth in their own way. Excellent teachers provide an initial framework, but it is for each student to make of that framework something of personal value. Excellent teachers also recognize that the product of the process may bear little obvious relationship to the starting conditions. Such is the joy and path of discovery.

I guess this is one of the reasons I value teaching and mentoring so highly and why I aspire to becoming the best teacher and mentor possible. As I have said so many times, it thrills me to see people succeed.

The hard part is that sometimes the path is not easy and both teaching and mentoring involves a degree of trust in the process, as well as a lot of waiting!

☺

On being erudite

Erudite? Why would I write an article about being erudite? It's not even a word we use anymore.

Well, oddly enough it has come up in more than a few conversations recently with people from a whole variety of backgrounds. My conversations with both students and friends and parents of my students have revolved around why we read newspapers or watch T.V. or don't read books like we once did.

Coincidentally, (not that I believe in coincidence) I have been reading a couple of books, one on leadership and one on improbability (I'm now looking for a book about the improbability of leadership, but we'll leave that aside for the moment). In each of the books the authors made mention of two things:

1. That they don't read newspapers or watch T.V., and
2. That they read widely, voraciously even.

When I see a recurring thread or theme in my life popping up in lots of different parts of my life at the same time, I tend to pay attention. Hence this article.

So, let's think about how the vast majority of us live our lives. We get our news and a good deal of our social conditioning from the media. We are not encouraged to be free-thinking anymore, we are encouraged to fit within the social norms that have been established....and possibly not without good reason.

But that's the whole point, if we do it without thinking about the reasons, then we are not free thinking, we are simply herd animals heading in the direction of the herd....even if it is straight over the edge of the cliff in a sort of lemming-like activity.

When my wife and I stopped watching T.V. almost nine years ago, we missed it, for maybe a week or so. The amount of free time it gave us was huge. We are both avid readers, and

we had time to read more and to think more about what we read and saw.

Several things flowed out of this seemingly simple decision.

Firstly we had a lot more free time.

Secondly, our young son is growing up without the influence of T.V., he builds, he imagines and invents, he plays, he thinks, he reads, he draws, he asks questions.

Thirdly, we did not find ourselves out of touch with current events...our friends and the simple flow of our lives always tends to bring the most important news events into our lives. Moreover, we were free to form our own opinions, because we hadn't already been pre-disposed to an opinion by the media.

Fourthly, we had more time to actually talk with our friends, to share their company, and...

Fifthly, we got to accomplish a lot more in the time we had available.

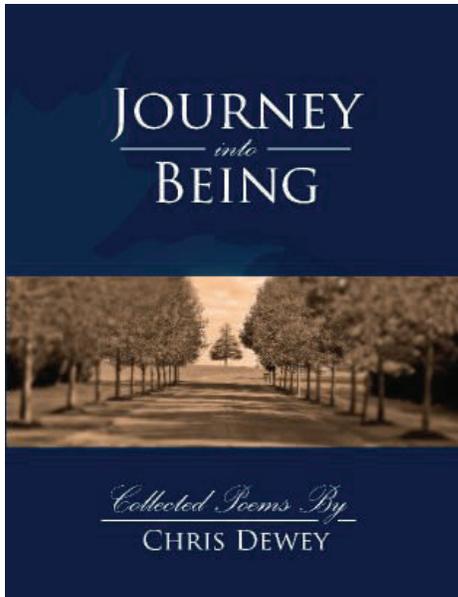
I'm not telling you that newspapers or T.V. are necessarily bad for us, I'm asking us to think about how much time we give to truly cultivating our minds, rather than turning off our minds and abdicating part of our decision making process to the media.

Being widely read is something that helps us to keep an open mind and a thirsty mind. Thirsty minds are healthy, eager, engaged and self-critical. When we take time to read, we realize the limits of our knowledge and can begin to learn what we don't know. We can acquire new perspectives on issues and circumstances and the more widely we read, the more likely we are to not take ourselves so seriously. If we only have a narrow perspective on the world, then our visions are likely to be similarly limited. It is not about what you know...it's about what you don't know!

Read any good books recently? ☺

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ NICK LOWE, U.K. OLYMPIC JUDO COACH, PEACHTREE CITY, GA, AUGUST 11TH, 2007
- ◆ NICK LOWE, U.K. OLYMPIC JUDO COACH, SMAA, STARKVILLE MS, AUGUST 18TH, 2007
- ◆ SMAC TOURNAMENT, GREENWOOD, MS, AUGUST 18TH, 2007
- ◆ BULLDOG BASH DEMONSTRATION, DOWNTOWN STARKVILLE, MS, AUGUST XX, 2007
- ◆ LOUISIANA STATE JUDO CHAMPIONSHIPS, XXXX, LA, SEPTEMBER 22ND, 2007.
- ◆ T'AI CHI CHUH WEEKEND RETREAT, PLYMOUTH BLUFF, COLOMBUS, MS, OCTOBER 6 & 7TH, 2007.
- ◆ AKAYAMA JU JITSU, FALL CLINIC, SMAA, STARKVILLE, MS, OCTOBER 20TH, 2007
- ◆ MISSISSIPPI JUDO TOURNAMENT, JACKSON, MS, OCTOBER 27TH, 2007



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