

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #8
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Why We Aren't Good Students; Why It Matters

When I went back to social work school in 2000, it had been 32 years since my college graduation. One of the first articles I read discussed social construction as an analytic tool. I found its approach fresh and exciting. Then I was told that the article was a classic – written in 1971 – 3 years after I graduated.

What hit me, at that moment, was that my intellectual growth had ground to a virtual standstill the moment I left college. My interest in learning didn't die. I read books (mostly history, biography, and politics), the New York Times, Newsweek, and the New York Review of Books; went to plays and movies; listened to NPR. But while I was an above average adult learner, I was woefully inadequate -- and utterly typical.

Why does serious study die when college ends? The answer lies in the values that drive our educational system and the world of work. In theory, our colleges (and secondary schools) encourage students to ask the next question, to be aggressively curious, and to see learning as an endless, ever deepening, powerfully rewarding journey. But the deeper reality is that our schools faithfully reproduce the predominant culture's competitive, win/lose values, making the competition for grades their operative priority.

Students, adapting to this imperative, become experts, not in learning, but in memorization and regurgitation. They graduate with neither the skills nor motivation to be effective learners. Instead, they are trained to be competitors, ready to jump into their next competitive challenge – work and career.

In that world, the incentives once again pull us away from serious scholarship. In virtually every profession, specialization is the surest path to career advancement. In my years as an attorney, my serious study – seminars, research, sustained attention to the latest developments – was focused on my specialty, bankruptcy law. In like manner, computer programmers are students of programming; doctors of medicine; and so on.

As Edward O. Wilson points out in Consilience (1998), this same phenomenon is the norm in academics. To build their careers, our budding scholars become economists, or political scientists, or biologists – and play by the rules of their chosen discipline. Then, to get ahead, they find a specific niche within their chosen field; a specialization within a specialization. So even our professional thinkers are pulled away from the “big questions” that should, one would think, be the central focus for a conscious, self-aware species:

- Who are we, biologically and psychologically?
- How is our world structured and how does that affect our lives?
- Given these realities, what are our best choices for living well?

For most of us, the idea of serious and sustained focus on these issues is a nonstarter. Instead, preoccupied with other priorities, we embrace easy, superficial answers to life's big questions; answers whose primary virtue is their ability to advance our political, professional and/or emotional agendas. Moreover, since we have so little exposure to the habits of scholarship, we fail to notice its absence. The result? We think that what we believe is true. As Wilson notes:

Most people believe they know how they themselves think, how others think too, and even how institutions evolve. But they are wrong. Their understanding is based on folk psychology, the grasp of human nature by common sense – defined (by Einstein) as everything learned to the age of eighteen – shot through with misconceptions. [Even] advanced social theorist, including those who spin out sophisticated mathematical models, are happy with folk psychology.

The downside of this phenomenon is easy to name. Habitual, unreflective thinking leads to excesses – from endemic and murderous tribal exceptionalism (Rome, the Crusades, British and American imperialism, etc., etc.) to self immolating beliefs such as radical jihadism and the rapture, in our own time.

Less obvious are the upside benefits of a serious commitment to life long learning. Does such a commitment really make a difference? My answer is a resounding yes. If we hope to craft the best possible answers to life's big questions, we need to become skilled and dedicated students: Grounding ourselves in the best available research: allowing that data to guide us in formulating answers to these questions; and always remaining open to new or revised answers as our empirical knowledge evolves.

My enthusiasm for this enterprise is not a generalized “this is good for you” platitude. To the contrary, the new understandings that result can literally change how we see the world and, with it, how we think, act, and feel.

So, for example, in the last few years Daniel Siegel and others have taught me about the neurobiological mechanisms that make our brains habit forming machines – reacting to new stimuli in the same way it reacted to similar stimuli in the past; increasing the likelihood of that response with each repetition. I also learned that our fight or flight mechanism for dealing with imminent danger reacts 10 times faster than our thinking brain, pumps cortisol and adrenaline into our system, pushes blood into our large muscle groups, and shrinks the activity of our thinking brain.

From Steven Stosny, I learned as well that the jolt of energy and (false) sense of clarity that fight or flight's physiological changes evoke can easily become addictive. He also described its addictive effect at an interpersonal level; that, when attacked, we are biologically wired to respond in kind, with a verbal or physical counter attack, or flight.

These understandings have changed my life. Because my mother was a rager, I grew up with a hair trigger temper. And for most of my life, I judged myself for my outbursts and coped with the shame that grew out of my inability to control my emotions. I suffered in silence, certain in the knowledge that there was something profoundly wrong with me.

But no more. Understanding the biological and psychological realities described above, I now make complete sense to myself. Confronted with anger from an early age, I learned to counter attack. And because the pattern kept repeating itself, that response became a deeply engrained habit, reinforced through the years by the jolt of energy that its activation provided. I wasn't wrong. I was human.

The result has been an easing of my shame and the defensive crouch it provoked – states of mind that, for years, limited my efforts to tame my emotional demons. Armed with a better understanding of the rage cycle, I was able to craft strategies to prevent its activation or, failing that, to interrupt it. Knowing that our brains are habit forming machines, I also embraced a more realistic vision of the change process – seeing it as a war of attrition, requiring a steady and open ended commitment to the new ways thinking, acting, and feeling to which I aspired.

Jared Diamond's Guns, Germs and Steel, offers another, good example of the transformative power of serious study. That book presents persuasive evidence suggesting that the historic dominance of Middle East and European cultures resulted from geographic and climactic factors that allowed for the early development and spread of plant and animal domestication. Diamond and others also describe the seismic impact of this event on human history, setting the stage for exponential population growth and – through the ability to control the food supply – for the emergence of the hierarchical, authoritarian cultures that have become dominant in the last 3,000 years.

With these understandings, any residual attachment I might have had to the mainstream cultural notion of Western superiority is gone, as is the mainstream view of history as a journey toward modernization and progress. Our history is not preordained and is not shaped primarily, or even substantially, by the intrigues of the kings and generals that fill our history books. Who we are and how we live is, most fundamentally, the result of the interplay of biology, environment and natural selection. And the appropriate time frame is not the 5,000 years of “civilization” covered in our history books. It is instead 200,000 years of Homo sapien's history, our 7 million years as a distinct primate subgroup, 3 billion years of life on earth, and 13 billion years of cosmic evolution.¹

I could cite many other examples of scholarship that have profoundly changed my thoughts and outlook: Paulo Frieire and Philip Lichtenberg's dissection of the psychology of authoritarian relationships; Carol Gilligan and Terence Real's insights into the different ways in which men and women are acculturated; and so on. Hopefully, however, the examples described above make my point: Serious, careful and sustained study and reflection can change our lives and, if they ever take root, our world as well.

¹ Since I am not trained as a historian, evolutionary biologist, or theoretical physicist, all dates are approximate.