

Your Strategy **by Art Ticknor**

A question for your consideration: What's the best way to read an essay or listen to a talk? (I'm really asking, so I'll put a pause here for you to consider the question.)

If you just kept reading, it indicates you're looking for answers outside yourself, from external authority. If you're looking for solid footing, on the other hand, you'll eventually need to turn to an internal source and become your own authority to answer the father of all philosophical questions.

But to get back to the "best way" question, in the past I read and listened critically, sorting what I read or heard into things I agreed with, things I disagreed with, and occasionally something to look further into. These days I tend to pay attention not so much to the words as to what's behind the words. When you read or listen, you're following a strategy – consciously or not – that may be active or passive. You're at a point of non-action when you're consciously viewing that mental activity or relative inactivity.

You're reading this today because you're pursuing a strategy to get what you want out of life. You may also be reading it because there's something you need to "hear." If that's the case, I don't know what it is, and you don't know what it is, so we'll have to rely on accident ... or on intelligence greater than human knowing. Would it bother you if you knew you were dependent on such an intelligence to find what you're looking for in life?

There was an old woman in Birmingham, Alabama who knew about that intelligence. William Samuel¹ told about her in a weekend retreat he held in Georgia in 1993, which was filmed by PBS. Samuel (1924-96) was a soldier who became a metaphysician and then a self-realized man. He was commissioned a lieutenant at age 18 and fought for about three years leading a troop of Chinese soldiers in their resistance against Japanese invaders. His interpreter turned out to be a Taoist master, who Bill spent some time with after the war. He then returned to Birmingham and became a well-known Christian Science practitioner and metaphysician. Then in the late 1950s or early 1960s he awakened to a realization of his essential being.

In the 1993 retreat Bill told how twelve days earlier he'd had a massive stroke, which left him unable to speak or move. The quantum physicist David Bohm was to have been there, also, but likewise had suffered from a critical medical problem at about the same time. You could see that Bill was having some difficulty with his speech at the beginning of the weekend, but his astounding recovery continued and his speech improved noticeably by the end of the filming.

Bill told about having had open-heart surgery some years before, followed later by an angioplasty. Everything seemed okay, then the angioplasty collapsed ... followed by a collapse of each of the earlier bypasses. His doctors apparently didn't give him any hope of surviving. He said he was lying in bed, should have already been dead, when an old woman who came in to take care of him leaned down and whispered in his ear: "Do you know what love is?" He said he was totally honest perhaps for the first time in his life and replied, "No. But I'd like to." She

responded: "It doesn't matter. God loves you, and I loves you." He said he began healing at that instant.

I suspect she'd had a rough life, a life that had been tough on her pride. I also suspect that Bill's "total honesty" reflected the inverse of pride. The intelligence that healed him was what the old woman felt as love. And it was transmitted when he was in the receptive state of total honesty. The only impediment to its transmission at every moment – at this very moment – is pride.

Hunger

When you're hungry, you follow an action plan to satisfy that want. You're reading this because you have a hunger or thirst you haven't been able to satisfy. It may not be defined, but it's something you feel – an unfulfilled longing that's deeper than words. Feeling that longing, that deep want, is the starting point – always come back to that. Whatever put that want there does the work of satisfying it *if you allow it*.

Everyone has a strategy they're pursuing to get what they want out of life. It may be conscious or largely unconscious. Becoming conscious of your strategy is a step in the direction of waking up. Observing it may have an impact. Part of becoming conscious of the strategy is refining your understanding of the goal it's aimed at. Cooperating with that goal is equivalent to getting out of its way.

Regarding that goal, what is it that you really want? Answering the question requires becoming aware of the goal that your ingrained strategy is pursuing. In a workshop last September, I heard several people say basically this: "I don't know what I want. I guess what I really want is to find out what I want." A want is a feeling – a feeling that something's missing, or lacking. You have to feel it ... and it's unpleasant. *Knowing* what you want is an interpretation of the feeling. It comes by using the tools at hand (intuition and reason), and it provides a tentative answer to the question: "What will satisfy the want?"

I was reading the autobiography earlier this year of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas², the African-American man whose 1991 Senate confirmation hearing was such a travesty. He's not at all the stuffed shirt I thought him based on seeing newscasts during the hearings, and his book is extremely honest and revealing. Anyway, one of the things that stayed with me was his description of how, as his 31st birthday approached, he took a day off and spent it at a law library with only pen and pad. The purpose? To focus on what he wanted out of life.

I heard an Internet interview recently of a British entrepreneur, Jim Mellon, who had written a book³ on financial planning with his business partner. His primary suggestion was to take a couple days, go away from the family and other commitments, and sit down and really think about what you're going to do when you're 65 and retired. He was referring mainly to financial planning, but his approach is a good one.

If you "know" what you want out of life, you're half way there. If you "don't know," when are you going to get serious?

Getting Serious

Getting serious is the equivalent of getting honest with oneself. Are you serious about finding the truth of your existence? I'm not talking about running around like your hair's on fire but of getting down to business – like Clarence Thomas did. Gautama apparently got serious when he sat down under the Bo tree; Jesus, when he spent 40 days in the desert; Paul Wood, when he put his head down on his desk and prayed for God to kill him. Unless you spent time around Richard Rose you probably haven't heard the story of Paul Wood. Richard said he was one of a handful of people he'd met whom he felt certain were self-realized. Paul had grown up a fundamentalist Christian and during World War II was a bombardier dropping bombs on Japan. When he saw the devastation that he was part of, all he could think of was what he'd learned from the Bible about how God was concerned with the fall of every sparrow. But where was God while the bombs dropped?

Paul became unable to function and was sent home to Texas. He couldn't hold down a job there, and his wife and kids left him. He said all he could do to try to figure things out was to say the Lord's Prayer, taking it apart phrase-by-phrase and word-by-word. He eventually found work as a used car salesman, but one day he was having a difficult time with a couple who were prospective customers, and he said he put his head down on his desk and prayed for death. He awoke a week or so later in a hospital, knowing the answer to his questions.

You can't force yourself to get serious. You basically have to run out of other options. As Winston Churchill quipped or complained about Americans, presumably because it took them so long to get into World War II, "They can "always be counted on to do the right thing – after they have exhausted all other possibilities." (His mother was an American, by the way.)

Surveys cited by Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness* show that: most students see themselves as more intelligent than the average student; 90% of motorists consider themselves safer-than-average drivers; and 94% of college profs consider themselves better-than-average teachers. "If you're like most people, then like most people, you don't know you're like most people," as Gilbert writes in his typically clever fashion. Are you more serious than the average seeker? Is your strategy going to keep you in the game until real seriousness grabs you?

The Strategy for Knowing the Self

The strategy for self-definition requires *becoming your own authority*. How is that done? By doing it on your own? By not being influenced by others? I've known people who have followed those strategies, and I agree that they are effective – for isolating yourself from possibly useful influences. They're really two sides of the same coin, the former ("no help") motivated by pride and the latter ("no influence") by fear.

It's far better to immerse yourself with people who are striving for what you're striving for, including those who may have preceded you down the path. But carve out alone time for yourself – daily, and occasionally for longer periods.

Do you become your own authority by thinking for yourself? I used to feel that it was the solution, but when I saw that all thinking is a reaction process, I realized that thinking for myself was literally impossible. What is possible, though, is to *look* for yourself with an unbiased eye not affected by thinking or feeling.

Whatever set of fears and desires is making the most noise determines your action or inaction – until there's sufficient detachment from identifying with the view (i.e., those fears and desires). To look objectively means not flinching from the contradictions you'll see about what you believe yourself to be.

Our primary desire is for *eternal survival in a state of grand equanimity*. Permanent healing brings us to that state when we realize the truth that "God loves us." The purest form of love is the identity of exact sameness. "God loves us" is equivalent to "God R us" – or "God is All, and all is God." Thus the search for permanent healing or satisfaction is the quest for knowing the self, for self-definition.

Going Within

The self is located, intuitively, within. Finding the self could therefore be described as going within. When you recognize that your hunger won't be satisfied by even the highest external games (for example, the metagames of art, science and religion in DeRopp's *The Master Game*), then the only possibility for satisfaction lies within ... the game of discovering what you truly are.

Going within expands the view. But since the view is not the viewer, going within expands the view of what you're not. This is what Richard Rose termed retreating from untruth about what you are. It's a journey of disillusionment.

Like the zoom on a camera, when the lens is fully zoomed out, you get a close-up view. Retracting the lens expands the view. Eventually you back up to a blank wall or abyss ... the boundary of the individual mind. And then a *reversal of focus* leads to a quantum jump or leap.

Speaking of focus, I hear friends who are attempting to know what they are but feel they aren't making sufficient progress say they need to focus more on self-definition. How is it done? Here's what Steve Jobs, Apple CEO, had to say about focus in a 3/17/08 *Fortune* magazine interview:

People think that focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the 100 other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully.... Life is brief, and then you die, you know?

How Can You Gauge if You're Making Progress?

Are you moving ... or are you just keeping busy? The journey is a chipping away at identification with what's not your essence, a backing away from faulty beliefs about what you are. An acid test: Have you seen anything new about yourself that dispels a previous belief/delusion?

What do you believe yourself to be? Until you become the consciousness that knows itself, you're stuck in the land of belief – and that's the source of your unsatisfied hunger. Fortunately, though, we're designed to look for the solid ground of certainty.

Are you challenging your beliefs about what you are? You first have to become conscious of your current self-definition then look for rigorous evidence of its validity – not what you read or someone tells you but first-person evidence that comes by looking for yourself. Admitting that you don't know what you are may be a sign of progress, but don't let it be a comfortable resting spot or insurmountable hurdle.

Why isn't everyone devoting every spare moment to *conscious* pursuit of what they want out of life? I hear friends say things like: "I don't know how ... I'm lazy ... I lack courage ... I haven't found Grace," and so on. Those are all beliefs about what you are! All you have to do is look at your complaints and excuses to find beliefs.

Other signposts of progress include satoris, natural koans, and mental processes seen in slow motion. As an example of a satori experience, after a one-week intensive early in my years of searching I was back at work and found myself holding off something until the other workers had gone home for the day. Then I felt myself going "up" (although I was still conscious of being seated at my desk) and getting a view that my mind found these words to describe: "Something IS!" I realized with amazement that for something to be, an original something had to arise out of nothing – a logical impossibility. I felt myself seemingly going up a second time, and my mind found the following words to describe the second view: "Everything is just the way it is." This realization was actually an appreciation for the conciliation of opposites, seeing that "true" and "false" have equal validity from a view that transcends them.

A natural koan found me one time when I was doing a solitary retreat. It came in the form of a question that presented itself and latched onto my mind. "What is the source of my awareness?" was the first thought I awoke with, the last thought I went to sleep with, and was rather constantly on my mind for a couple days. It was wonderful. And then late one afternoon as I sat resting on a tree stump in the woods, an answer came in the form of a quiet vision: I saw that I was attached to something bigger than myself at the end of a long string. A few years later I heard Richard Rose say that every seeker has to find his umbilical cord, the mental umbilical cord connecting us to our source, and I knew then what I had seen.

An earlier time when I was on a solitary retreat it had rained for several days, and I was cold (having no heat source) and hungry (from fasting). When the rain ceased, I went for a walk and spotted a boulder on the edge of a stream with the sun shining on it. My first thought was how nice it would be to warm myself there. But then I saw a "no trespassing" sign posted on a nearby tree. And my reaction was fear that an unfriendly property owner might shoot me for trespassing. I found myself stopped in my tracks on the dirt road, watching the argument in my mind in slow motion. It was like a tug of war, with the opposing contestants trying to win their side of the argument. The "team" that finally made the most noise won the argument – a very primitive operation, indeed.

Another sign of progress is becoming less personal in your interests. We generally begin searching for happiness (emotional) or meaning (intellectual); later stages of the search gravitate toward truth or reality. What takes place is a refinement of your understanding of your deepest desire. What you believe yourself to be is shrinking; more view coincides with less self.

If Your Strategy Doesn't Seem to Be Working

At the heart of the struggle for self-realization is an opposition of wants: one is to be relieved of your burden, while the other is to maintain the feeling of being the final arbiter. The feeling that you are in control, or should be, is the basic symptom of the illusion of individuality.

It's no mistake that the first step in the AA 12-step program is admitting that your life is out of (your) control. Have you reached that point of honesty yet?

If your strategy doesn't seem to be working, it may help to look at it ("Sometimes you can observe a lot by watching," as the famous yogi of baseball, Yogi Berra, was credited with saying).

- The mind is an *addiction machine*. Bernadette Roberts⁴ at 17 was so good at disciplines that she realized the next step in discipline was giving up disciplines. (Don't overrate yourself on this!) Does your strategy condone habits?
- The mind's a *forgetting machine*. Gurdjieff⁵ urged his students to wage a war against (mental) sleep, devising alarm clocks to awaken themselves from daydreaming. Does your strategy compensate for forgetting?
- The mind's a *distraction machine*. "If you throw enough mud at the ceiling, some of it will stick," as Richard Rose would tell his listeners. Does your strategy divert energy from non-critical pursuits every day?
- The mind's a *fickle machine*. Does your strategy accommodate varying moods and convictions?

The spiritual path is contra-habit, contra-forgetting, contra-distraction, contra-fickleness.

For years I dreamed of being an architect. I read biographies of architects, studied their designs, luxuriated in their successes of creating beauty. But I never followed a strategy or action plan for becoming an architect. Are you merely dreaming about self-realization?

More Stumbling

The author of *Stumbling on Happiness* cites a study in which 96% of the cancer patients claimed to be in better health than the average cancer patient! Does your strategy enable you to avoid the facts of your life?

Gilbert also notes in his witty style the many studies indicating: "The self considers itself to be a very special person." Is your strategy enhancing this conviction?

He tells us that 9 of 10 people say they'd regret a foolish action more than a foolish inaction – but that studies actually show that people of all ages and walks of life regret inactions more than actions. Does your strategy allow fear of making the wrong decision to lead to inaction?

Not making a serious commitment to yourself to pursue your deepest desire wholeheartedly is a way (a path, a strategy) to try to avoid something you fear. But will you regret it??

Footnotes:

- (1) See Selfdiscoveryportal.com for more on William Samuel's life and teaching.
- (2) *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir*, by Clarence Thomas
- (3) *The Top 10 Investments for the Next 10 Years: Investing Your Way to Financial Prosperity*, by Jim Mellon and Al Chalabi
- (4) *Contemplative: Autobiography of the Early Years*, by Bernadette Roberts
- (5) *G.I. Gurdjieff: The War Against Sleep*, by Colin Wilson