

Come Up Higher

"As iron sharpens iron," says the Book of Proverbs, "so one man sharpens another." I don't quite know how this worked in Biblical days, but the meaning is not lost: there are people in our lives who are absolutely crucial to the development of our character and our ability to think outside of the tiny worlds we've created for ourselves. We either take advantage of their sharpening proclivities or we miss out. I believe we simply *must* follow our instincts when we sense we've come upon one of those sharpening agents and go after the experience because it might be glorious, transforming, profound.

I just spent a week with a bunch of phenomenal people at the Million Dollar Consulting® College conducted by [Alan Weiss](#). While the name of the event may sound dubious, I'm here to tell you it was an educational experience utterly foundational for my growth, not just as a consultant but also as a thought leader. We spent a week being challenged, stretched, and twisted into uncomfortable positions, encouraged to learn to *be comfortable there*. "There" is not just a place where we'll all make a million dollars (a delightful contemplation!), but where we think like people born to handling millions. The participants were pulled out of small thinking to big thinking, pushed to recognize our value and the gifts we bring to the world.

In one exercise, I found myself unable to pry my brain open wide enough to envision the possibility that I could provide exactly what was being asked of me. I got stuck on just the little I thought I had to offer. I needed my teammates, and Alan, to point out that when the question is asked, "Can you do this?", the answer is always, "Of course!"

I am perfectly capable, motivated, and imaginative enough to have immediately responded with an

"Of course!" But I didn't. I retreated to the comfortable, fearful of the possible. For just a moment, anyway, because I got it, and it changed me.

What was most gratifying was the opportunity to talk thoughtfully and purposefully all week at an intellectual level that pulled me up and energized me. Alan's about as brilliant as they come, and it was an illumination that we were a particular kind of moth attracted to a singular kind of flame. At the end of this truly life-changing week, I shared the following quote by Denis Diderot, French philosopher and writer during the Enlightenment period:

Vibrating strings . . . [make] others vibrate, and it is in this way that one idea calls upon a second, and the two together a third, and all three a fourth, and so on; you can't set a limit to the ideas called up and linked together by a philosopher meditating or communing with himself in silence and darkness. This instrument can make astonishing leaps, and one idea called up will sometimes start an harmonic at an incomprehensible interval.

Diderot's beautiful picture refers to the ideas conjured up in one person's mind, but for me, the quote represented the week I had just spent: the joy of being part of many strings set to vibrating by the force of one strong personality. It was exquisite. I am still feeling that harmonic. May you all be so blessed as to have this kind of experience as you follow your leadings! ♪



Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her seminars on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused listeners at companies and business organizations throughout the country to rate her presentations as "the best seminar of the conference!" She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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INSIGHT

An article in a summer issue of *The New Yorker* (7-28-08), "The Eureka Hunt," offered a fascinating dive into the research a cognitive neuroscientist at Northwestern University is doing on what happens inside our brains when we have an insight. Here are some highlights that are still feeding me with inspiration:

- * [Mark Jung-Beeman](#) (the researcher) heard a talk by a psychologist who had demonstrated that insight was interfered with when subjects had to explain their thought processes while trying to solve a puzzle. He began doing experiments with puzzle-solving using fMRI and EEG.
- * When we try to analyze the answer to a problem, we often reach an impasse. "But sometimes, just when the brain is about to give up, an insight appears. 'You'll see people bolt up in their chair and their eyes go all wide,'" said a graduate student who helps in the research. "'Sometimes they even say 'Aha!' before they blurt out the answer.'"
- * When the brain first focuses on a problem, it uses all of its resources; when sufficiently focused, it needs to then relax in order to find the more remote solutions. "'The relaxation phase is crucial,' Jung-Beeman said. 'That's why so many insights happen during warm showers.'"
- * An ideal time for insights is right after we wake up, before we're fully cognizant, still drowsy and mentally disorganized. It's at this time the appropriate part of our brain is extremely active. "[I]f we're stuck on a difficult problem, it's better to set the alarm clock a few minutes early so that we have time to lie in bed and ruminate. We do some of our best thinking when we're half asleep."
- * Big ideas come when we let our minds wander. People have come up with phenomenal insights when doing things that have nothing to do with the problem at hand.
- * "If you want to encourage insights, then you've got to also encourage people to relax" and distract themselves, said another researcher who lauded Google's Ping-Pong tables for employees. It turns out that when we think we are not thinking about the problem, our neurons are still active below the radar, searching out the possibilities, preparing for the storm that is insight.

Insight comes as a flash after we have spent time attempting to analyze a problem but have come up short. Instead of succumbing to frustration, distract yourself. Your brain is still working on it! Perhaps that's why we so often say, "it blew my mind"! 🧠



Oh, how we love a good book! I'm on my second reading of *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafes, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* by Joan DeJean, a professor of French in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania. I found it while browsing the fashion section of my local library.

What an enthralling history lesson! Louis XIV set out to make France the standard for excellence in every area and along the way created all of the things we love, including modern marketing techniques. Louis loved shoes and made them a desirable item of clothing. He singlehandedly made diamonds the symbol of royal wealth, pushing aside pearls. He dispensed with tea as the hot drink of choice and made coffee and pastries the national dessert. He created the environment that produced name designers, celebrity hairstylists, shopping for pleasure, high-end flea markets, and—no kidding—the umbrella. Under his reign, France became known as the "City of Lights" (he demanded someone invent streetlamps), the arbiter of fashion, the standard for high-end, quality workmanship, and the reason every woman in America who had a friend traveling abroad would beg for information on "what they're wearing in Paris."

It's no coincidence that the word "etiquette" was coined during his time as king. While this was not in the book, there are two most often-told stories of how the word came to be, and both are correct. When Louis finished his first building campaign at the Palace at Versailles, he opened his gardens to the public, which promptly trampled the grass and picked the flowers. Louis had "etiquets," or signs, installed on the lawns to prevent vandalism. (*Etiquette* is the French word for "ticket," and is in modern usage as the word for "label.") In this context, etiquette is how to behave properly in public.

The other story goes like this: when people came to Versailles to meet with the king or a cabinet minister, the visitor would be given a cheat sheet with the rules of conduct, such as when to bow, what to say, how to address a specific person. In order to enter the appropriate royal presence, you had to have your ticket—your *etiquette*—showing you knew what to do. Here the context is behaving properly in a formal setting. Louis wanted the French to be considered a people of quality who always exhibited the best manners.

Professor DeJean says the king's general motto was disseminated throughout the country to tradesmen and vendors: "Stick to the high end and forget the low. Never underestimate the importance of decor and ambience." Let others create knock-offs or pass off shoddy workmanship as acceptable; the French should produce only the best. One could not have a better directional sign to excellence. I've adopted it as my own. 🧠

Teddy Bear Says...



Many people become nervous around the Teddy Bear whenever we dine together or interact at a business event. I know, I know—how could anyone be nervous around *me*? It's my life's mission to make others feel comfortable (next to making sure *I'm* comfortable, of course). But they worry about whether or not they're using their utensils in just the right way or they


apologize for passing food to the left instead of the right. They look my way anxiously when introducing people, concerned they're not doing the introduction perfectly.

I know some of my fellow etiquette experts would disagree, but this has always been my philosophy: *context is everything*. Americans are more informal than those in other countries, and really, this has been part of what makes us American since practically the first colonists. We created our own style of using utensils when dining in a fine restaurant, came to consider bowing to our superiors a sign of weakness, and developed a manner of friendly familiarity that immigrants came to love once they began to assimilate into American culture.

So let's not get all caught up in an overly formalized way of behaving that prevents getting to know people and enjoying good company. We shouldn't be picking apart how our best friends use their knives and forks when eating at Applebee's (unless they're just shoveling it in) and we shouldn't be having anxiety attacks about protocol when at an informal cocktail party with familiar colleagues. Practicing formal etiquette means we can utilize it when it's required and we'll have a template for proper behavior when strict formality is not required.

I'm not saying we should ignore blatant rudeness or the complete lack of good table manners. It's never appropriate to slurp coffee or belch at the table; one should learn to eat properly. But on the other hand, if I'm with friends at Billy Bob's Hands-On Barbeque, I'm not going to bother with feeling dismayed at the lack of a knife and fork to eat the slow-cooked ribs. And if the friend of a friend approaches the table to

say hello, you won't hear me complaining we weren't formally introduced even though we managed to offer our names and a smile and enjoy a few laughs before he/she walked away. We weren't at a reception for the Queen of England. We were among friends at Billy Bob's. We make allowances for friends and relatives (and for the clueless). When others are informal, we adjust, and when they are formal, we adjust, because we know how. Context is everything.

Remember that over Thanksgiving tables. You're with family. Treat them with respect, but don't flip out if they don't follow perfect etiquette. Practice your good manners and make sure others feel comfortable, because that's what good manners do. Consider taking a long nap after the big meal and letting sleeping dogs lie. 

The Daily Coyote Teleconference

I'm happy to report the teleconference I announced in last month's newsletter with Shreve Stockton, creator of the blog "[The Daily Coyote](#)," is full! The 150 people who will dial in on November 24th to hear me interview Shreve and ask her questions via email are almost as excited as I am. The recording of the call will be posted on the website by Wednesday, November 26th, so make plans to visit and hear the story of this remarkable young woman and her journey to Wyoming where she saved a coyote pup she named Charlie. I'm grateful to Shreve for her willingness to share her time on this call!

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