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School Thy Feelings!
A Path to Happier, Healthier, Spiritual Living
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NOTE: This article was written with the intent of publishing it to a wider audience. It does not, therefore, include a consideration of how the concept elucidated might be applied in therapy. However, because it states so clearly the basic concept of rational behavior, it is presented as submitted with the expectation that readers will be able to make application to their professional practice without further help, or that they will turn to other sources (such as Dr. Malsby's writings, as referenced) for further information.

--Editor

School thy feelings. O my brother:
Train thy warm impulsive soul;
Do not its emotion smother.
But let wisdom's voice control.

School thy feelings:
There is power in the cool collected mind:
Passion shatters reason's tower.
Makes the clearest vision blind.

Consider for a moment the meaning of a couple of key phrases in this familiar hymn: (1) School thy feelings; (2) Train thy warm impulsive soul. Each implies that one need not assume that feelings are just facts which one must accept and learn to live with. The clear implication is that one has both the power to control and to change (school, train) one's emotional responses. Yet, how often have you sung this hymn without contemplating the valid message and instruction it contains?

There is a common tendency to deny personal control over one's feeling by making such statements as: "He makes me so angry when . . ." or "That always upsets me." or "It makes me feel bad when . . ." The implication conveyed by these kinds of statements is that the feelings one experiences are the direct result of what others do or say, or of circumstances and external facts, or of outside forces and events.

The truth is, we control our feelings by the kind of thinking we do. It is true that past experiences influence our thinking. Nevertheless, it is the current thinking which causes our emotions or feelings. This is by no means a new insight: just a commonly overlooked fact. The Greek philosopher Epictetus, for example, said: "It's not facts and events that upset man, but the view he takes of them." Shakespeare similarly stated, "It's our opinion of things that disturbs us, not things themselves." More recently Malsby and others have used this concept effectively in therapy.

A simple analogy may help bring these statements into focus. Let us say you have an appointment with the bishop at his office Wednesday evening at 6:00 p.m. It is not at all convenient for you, but it is the only free time the bishop has this week. It is necessary for you to reschedule another important personal appointment: after all, the bishop did say that it was vital that he see you this week. He promised to be there promptly so as not to interfere too much with your other plans for the evening. You have arrived at his office promptly at 6:00 p.m. He has not yet arrived, but since he indicated that it is vital, and that he would be there promptly, you wait for him. Soon it is 6:15, then 6:30, and now 6:45. You have another appointment that you are committed to keep at 7:00 p.m., and it is several miles away; you will be late. Considering these hypothetical facts, what kinds of feelings or emotions might you experience--frustration, annoyance, irritation, or anger? (Obviously, there are numerous possible emotional responses, including calm acceptance.)

If someone were to ask why you are feeling the way you do, you might reply, "Because I had an appointment with the bishop. He promised to be here promptly at 6:00 p.m. He is 45 minutes late already and I am going to be late getting to my other appointment across town!" In essence, you are saying that it is the bishop's fault that you are feeling the way you do. After all, he didn't keep his appointment as he promised.

Just as you are about to leave, the 1st counselor to the bishop steps into the foyer and informs you that at about ten minutes before six the bishop was in a very serious automobile accident and is in the hospital in critical condition. Now, what kinds of feelings are you likely to experience? The chances are very slight that they are the same ones you previously had as you paced back and forth in front of the bishop's office. Yet, the reasons you gave for their existence have not changed. He still isn't there, and you are still going to be late for your other appointment.

The one crucial element that did change, and in turn changed your feelings, is the way you thought about the facts involved. As Epictetus stated, "It's not facts and events that upset man, but the view he takes of them." When one changes one's view or way of thinking about the facts and
events, there is a corresponding change in feelings which accompany it.

Have you ever wondered how it is possible for two people experiencing the exact same event to react with completely opposite emotions? Consider the following example. Two friends sit anxiously awaiting the final results of a national presidential election. The announcement is finally made. Candidate ‘X’ has won the election and candidate ‘Y’ has been soundly defeated. At this announcement, friend ‘A’ becomes excited and happy, while friend ‘B’ slips into a sullen, angry depression. Why the different reactions? There was only one set of facts given and both heard them at the same time, given by the same newscaster. Obviously, they each had different thoughts about the election results!

There is a logical, physiological explanation for the process involved in experiencing any given emotion. Let me briefly describe the ‘anatomy of an emotion.’ First of all, if you stop to think about it, you will realize that you generally experience your feelings in or through the activity of one or more of your vital organs. For example, you don’t feel fear or anxiety in your head, but rather in your chest, lungs, heart, or stomach. You think and evaluate with your head, and feel in your vital organs.

The knowledge that feelings are registered (felt) in the vital organs is not new. In Genesis 43:30, we read, ‘And Joseph made haste; for his bowels (meaning ‘the interior parts; especially the deep or remote parts or the vital organs of his body) did yearn for his brother.’ In Luke 24:32 is recorded a conversation between Christ’s disciples after his resurrection, ‘And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?’ More recently, the Lord, speaking to Joseph Smith about the Saints in Missouri (D&C 101:9), said, ‘Verily I say unto you, notwithstanding their sins, my bowels are filled with compassion toward them.’ The Lord instructed Joseph (D&C 121:45), ‘Let thy bowels also be full of charity toward all men...’

Frequently the same vital organs are involved in registering different, even opposite, emotions. You know what the physical sensations mean because you associate them with the specific kind of thinking you have been doing. For example, your heart may pound with joyous excitement, or with dreaded fear. You immediately know the difference because of the thoughts that precede or accompany the pounding.

The relationship between thinking and the resulting emotion or feeling is lawful and orderly. Let me describe the process by the use of the following diagram:

The vital organs themselves have no reasoning power to decide how to react in a given situation. They depend on the thinking or ‘self talk’ that goes on in the neo-cortex for their activating cues.

Even if the kind of thinking that goes on in the neo-cortex results in a negative, undesirable feeling, there is a way to change that feeling. Stated plainly, the best way for one to feel better is by thinking better. Negative feelings are the direct result of negative thoughts. Positive feelings are the result of positive thoughts. It is a relatively simple law of cause and effect. William James said, ‘The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.’ The challenge is to know how to alter one’s attitudes of mind. The remainder of this article will focus on a way to go about altering one’s attitudes of mind.

If the thinking one does produces negative, undesirable feelings, the best way to change those undesirable feelings is by thinking more ‘rational’ positive thoughts. A good way to accomplish this is by writing down each of the thoughts associated with the fact, situation, or event that culminated in the negative feeling. After the thoughts have been written down, challenge them by applying the following five questions to each:

1. Perception or Activating Event
2. Thinking, Evaluating
3. Feeling

Perceptions about facts, events, or situations are made available to us through some form of sensation (A) entering through one or more of the five senses. The perception is processed by thinking and evaluating (B) in the neo-cortex (part of the brain). It is also stored in the form of a memory. The information can be used immediately or retrieved and used later. (This, very likely, is a key part of the process by which we create and maintain attitudes.) The kind of thinking one does about a given perception activates the limbic system (another part of the brain) which controls the autonomic nervous system, which in turn controls and activates the vital organs. Directly or indirectly resulting in a feeling (C).
1. Is this thought based on objective, observable reality, as opposed to subjective opinion?

2. Does thinking this thought help protect my life or preserve my physical well-being?

3. Does thinking this thought really help me achieve my short- and long-range goals?

4. Does thinking this thought help me prevent undesirable conflict with others or within myself?

5. Does thinking this thought help me feel the way I want to feel?

If the answer is no to any three or more of these five questions, when applied to a given thought, it is highly likely that the thought contains irrational components, and will, therefore, produce a negative, undesirable feeling. When this is the case, it would be in one’s best interest to replace that thought with a “rational” positive thought. The term “rational” as it is used here refers to that which is, or is not, in one’s best interest. For example, fear, sufficient to help one avoid dangerous situations or to be careful in unavoidable but dangerous situations, would be considered “rational” because it is in the person’s best interest. On the other hand, however, fear or anxiety which some experience when having to speak in a meeting may cause stuttering, forgetting, or other undesirable (but not necessarily dangerous) behaviors which they wish to avoid. These feelings would therefore be considered “irrational” because they are not in the best interest of the speaker.

Let us return to the situation at the bishop’s office to see how this might be applied (refer to diagram on page 19).

A. Activating event. The bishop had me reschedule another appointment so I could meet him at his office at 6:00 p.m. He hasn’t shown up, and I will be late for another appointment across town.

B. Evaluating thoughts, or self-talk (suggested possible thoughts).

1. How thoughtless of the bishop not to show up after I have gone to so much trouble to be here!

2. It isn’t fair for him to cause me to be late for my appointment.

3. I’m not going to this much trouble for him again.

4. Etc.

C. Feeling. Irritation or anger.

Now let’s take thought number 1 under B and apply the five rational thought check questions. The thought was, “How thoughtless of the bishop not to show up after I have gone to so much trouble!”

Question 1: Is this thought based on objective reality, as opposed to subjective opinion? The answer is obviously no. At the time of the thought, there was no way you could have known that his failure to show up was thoughtlessness. That is just your opinion, formulated without the benefit of the facts.

Question 2: Does thinking this thought help me protect my life or preserve my physical well-being? Again, the answer is no. In fact, you have made yourself upset when there was no threat either to your life or to your physical well-being.

Question 3: Does thinking this thought help me achieve my short- or long-range goals? No! If your goals include positive self-control and eventual perfection, the thought actually deters you from your goals.

Question 4: Does thinking this thought help me prevent undesirable conflict with others, or within myself? You would have to say no to this question also. If the resultant anger leads you to “tell the bishop off” next time you see him, or avoid him because of your anger, (or to drive recklessly in getting to the other appointment), the thought was not in your best interest.

Question 5: Does thinking this thought help me feel the way I want to feel? Definitely no! Few of us relish the idea of being frustrated, upset, or angry. It isn’t possible to be happy all the time, but you probably would prefer to be calm at least, and at peace.

Our analysis reveals that a “no” answer is appropriate to all five questions. We can be fairly certain, therefore, that that particular thought contributed significantly to the negative feeling experienced. In order to change the feeling, it will be necessary to think a “rational” positive thought. For example, you might think, “The bishop must have a good reason for being late because he was rather insistent on my being here tonight at 6:00 p.m. He is generally very responsible and conscientious. Therefore, I will go on to my other appointment and then check back with him as soon as I can. Upsetting myself will neither get him here on time nor get me to my other appointment on time. Therefore, I will remain calm and make the best of the situation.”

If you apply the five rational thought check questions to this more rational thought, you will find that you can answer “yes” to at least four out of the five questions. Therefore, the thought will produce a significantly more positive, or at least calm, feeling. Probably no one would expect you to be happy about the fact that the bishop did not show up nor that you
were late for your other appointment, but it would be in your best interest at least to remain calm.

The contrast between the results of these two different thoughts helps to illustrate two points. First, there is value in learning to “school your feelings.” Second, it is not facts that cause feelings, but the way one thinks about them. James Allen, in his little booklet As A Man Thinketh has much to say about this commonly overlooked fact. (I recommend the whole booklet to you for your reading.) Let me share with you a couple of vignettes from it:

Man is made or unmade by himself; in the armour of thought he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself: he also fashions the tools with which he builds for himself heavenly mansions of joy and strength and peace. By the right choice and true application of thought, man ascends to divine perfection; by the abuse and wrong application of thought, he descends below the level of the beast. Between these two extremes are all grades of character, and man is their maker and their master.

All that man achieves and all that he fails to achieve is the direct result of his own thought . . . a man’s weakness and strength, purity and impurity, are his own, and not another man’s: they are brought about by himself, and not by another, and they can only be altered by himself, never by another. His suffering and his happiness are evolved from within. As he thinketh, so he is. As he continues to think, so he remains.

President Kimball, in his inspiring book, The Miracle of Forgiveness, included a chapter (8) entitled, “As a Man Thinketh.” I recommend that the thoughtful reader read that chapter in the light of the principles that we have been taught in this article. He said, “Inescapably we reap what we sow . . . How could a person possibly become what he is not thinking?” In other words, how can one have happy, pleasant or peaceful feelings without thinking those kinds of thoughts?

If you are willing to modify or change your way of thinking about facts, situations, or events which you may not like, you will change the feelings or emotions that you experience. You can choose to have positive feelings in spite of the inherent nature of the situation or event. Facts do not cause feelings. The way we think about facts causes them. Thought is the key. Self-control truly is strength; calmness is itself power. It is indeed in your eternal best interest to “School Thy Feelings.” That is a positive step toward becoming perfect, “even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

REFERENCES


