

Enhancing and Accessing Expertise: Finding the Personal Community of Thought and Feeling in Our Own Self

William Bergquist Ph.D. and Kevin Weitz, Psy.D.

We are ourselves a rich source of expertise regarding many matters. While we don't always fully appreciate this expertise and often distort or make poor use of this personal expertise, it is there for our use – thanks to our capacity to process at multiples in our brain at the same time, and thanks to the recent expansion in the human brain of an advanced mental processing system (the prefrontal cortex).

Put simply, we host a community of thoughts and feelings that resides in our own psyche. It is often not fully known or appreciated by us—yet it must be known and accessed if we are to be effective personally in addressing the challenges (and crises of expertise) that are to be found in mid-21st Century life. We must be discerning, thoughtful consumers of existing expertise and must find the expertise within our own base of knowledge. I propose that this personal base of knowledge is subtly guiding the decisions we make regarding expertise being offered, as well as ways in which we engage our own expertise in solving the major issues that are emerging in mid-21st Century life.

Michael Polanyi (1969) the Nobel-prize winning scientist (turned philosopher) distinguishes between that which we are attending to (what we focus on) and that which we are attending from (the position we are taking when pointing to and focusing on something else). Typically, we are aware of that to which we are attending but are unaware (or at least care little about) that from which we are attending.

For Polanyi, the attending from dimension is critical to our understanding of the true nature of knowledge. Specially, we can never study the source of our attention—for at that point it becomes the focus of our attention. We are now attending from somewhere else and this somewhere else itself can never be objectively studied. In other words, there is ultimately no such thing as objectivity and dispassionate analysis. There is always the passion, bias and purpose to be found in the position from which we are attending. The tidy distinction between science and art is shattered.

We would suggest that each of us is often attending from several internal sources of expertise when we are making choices, when we are expressing our opinion about something, and when we are seeking fully to understand how another person is seeing and living in the world. Put succinctly, we believe that each of us is attending from diverse sources of expertise whenever we are seeking to be conscious and intentional in our thinking and decision-making. This process of conscious and intentional thought is based in what Daniel Kahneman (2011) identifies as *Slow Thinking*. By contrast, there is something that Kahneman calls *Fast Thinking*. This is the often habitual and bias-laden thinking that takes very little time or energy. It borrows uncritically from the uncritical and often biased expertise that dominate our society.

To better understand the observations made to start this essay, we will turn briefly to an emerging neuroscientific understanding of the functions and dynamics operating inside our self. We will identify

several ways in which we can access the rich sources of expertise that reside inside our head (and body). It only takes thoughtful attention to this personal expertise—Kahneman’s slow thinking.

However, such attention is not easy to maintain in a world filled with stress and challenge. It is to this matter of stress and challenge that we must often turn in considering the sources of personal expertise. And it is to the rich opportunities for finding this personal expertise that we first turn by considering the multiple tiers on which the human mind operates.

The Multi-Tiered Mind

The most important feature to note about the human brain, as it relates to our access to personal expertise, is its multi-tiered structure. Apparently, we are able to do many things at the same time—some of these things being quite conscious and deliberate and other things being semi-conscious or unconscious and driven by forces that are often outside our conscious control. We seem to be operating at three tiers and each tier provides us with a different kind of information and insight into our own internal world as well as our external world. This diversity of information and insight is a real bonus—and we need to take full advantage of this diversity when navigating a world in which expertise from outside ourselves is often flawed and contradictory.

We will briefly explore the nature and function of each tier—and make use of a metaphor that we are borrowing from our use of the stove located in our kitchen. We should probably offer a correction at this point, because the stove we are describing is a bit larger and more elaborately equipped than found in most domestic kitchens—for it has three sets of burners (rather than the usual two sets). We might have to imagine the kitchen located in a fancy restaurant rather than in our home.

Front Burners

This set of burners are where we are focusing our attention when cooking our meal (processing information in our brain). This is the seat of Consciousness, from which we formulate, enact and monitor our verbal communication with other people, our resolution of conflict, our solving of problems—and most important our decision-making processes. Our primary intentional engagement with the outside world (and particularly other people) is managed through the cortical processes engaged via the front burners.

The front burners are also the preferred location for our cooking (processing) of a specific dish (distinctive set of memories). This dish is called *Expository Memory*. We know now that this is one or two different systems operating in our brains. The second system is called *Procedural (or Operational) memory*. The expository (or declarative) memory system brings existing memories to bear when addressing new information and when the new information leads us to engage in new behaviors. This is the system that leads to learning and experimentation.

Our expository brains are operating when we are reading a book, learning how to drive a golf ball, or learning how to drive a car. It is primarily operating through the front burner and is cooking alongside our ongoing reasoning. When we are operating at our best, the processes of reasoning and learning are

tightly interwoven. Using a term introduced by Donald Schon (1983), we are engaged in “reflective practice” and are learning from our ongoing experiences and the actions we take in the world.

From a neurobiological perspective, we can point to our *Prefrontal Cortex* as the primary location of the front burners. On the one hand, the prefrontal cortex is a wonderfully flexible and complex cortical mechanism. It is the main reason for the “evolution” of the human species as “homo sapiens.” This small cortical structure located just behind our eyes is primarily responsible for the “sapien” in our name. On the other hand, the prefrontal cortex is the youngest part of our brain. It doesn’t come with much evolutionary history or accumulated wisdom. It can easily be overwhelmed.

There is a famous essay written by George Miller (1956) showing that we usually can only work at any one time with no more than seven entities (plus or minus one or two). We are likely to chunk things together in order to work in this limited capacity. For example, we group together a series of letters (producing sensible or even nonsensical words) that can be more easily remembered than the individual letters. While this chunking process is critical to our ability to engage the prefrontal cortex in our complex world, it can also lead to the distortion of reality. After all, nonsensical words are fine when engaged in a memory task; however, the nonsensical interpretation of facts or nonsensical acceptance of a political slogan or set of inaccurate “facts” that can be easily remembered is not very helpful.

Finally, it is important to note that the prefrontal cortex is most often overwhelmed when we are tired, distracted by a challenging task – or are operating under conditions of stress. Faced with the challenges associated with living and working in a world that is saturated with volatility, uncertainty, complexity ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction (VUCA-Plus) it is no wonder that our prefrontal cortex is often out of commission or focusing mostly on the management of anxiety (Bergquist, 2020). Our internal expert is rattled. We can no longer rely on this expert for matters concerned with thoughtful, and slow-operating rationality. Our specialist in communication, conflict-management, problem-solving and decision-making is exhausted and might even have abandoned us. This internal expert has taken our expository memory with them. This critical source of insight has been taken off the stove: we no longer are learning from our experiences. When our front-burner functions are no longer available then we often defer to the functions provided by our middle burners. We look for expertise from a new internal source.

Middle Burners

As we turn to help from the cortical functions being provided by our middle burners, we are likely to find that this assistance has been offered many times before in our life. The middle burners are aligned the habitual ways in which we think and act in our life. All we need to do is turn on these burners and they do a fine job of cooking whatever is placed on them—even very complex and elusive issues that we moved from our front burner.

The behavioral economists identify some important kind of habits that often are provided to us by the society in which we live as well as being comfortable ways in which we “naturally” think and act. These habits are called “heuristics” and consist of such forms of comfortable (and often lazy) ways of thinking as picking the first thing (or the last thing) that is presented to us, picking what everyone else has picked,

or picking that which is loudest, flashiest, more emotionally-arousing – or simply easiest to understand and remember. Advertising executive and marketing experts know all about heuristics but haven't been inclined to tell us about these habits until the behavioral economists opened the operating manual of these executives and experts—and did extensive research to demonstrate how heuristics operate in a very powerful and predictable manner.

On the one hand, heuristics are quite valuable in helping us get through the day and make trivial decisions about which cereal to buy or which of the many varieties of coffee to order from the local Starbucks. They serve much less valuable (and even counter-productive) functions when engaged to determine who will receive our vote or deciding on the best treatment option to combat our cancer. Sadly, our front burners are often not available when confronting these more difficult decisions—for we are likely to be stressed when confronted with these decisions. Our most thoughtful internal expert residing in the prefrontal cortex is often unavailable leaving us with no good option other than relying on one of our heuristics-based middle burner experts. Actually, there is another option: we can turn to an external expert to tell us what to do. Unfortunately, the choice of external expert is often governed by one or more of our internal heuristics—and the choice is often flawed. Herein resides one of the sources of crisis in the way expertise is engaged and abused in mid-21st Century life.

Even when we are not stressed (or fatigued or sick or under the influence of some drug), the heuristic might be hard to avoid—for it is often deployed by us in a semi-conscious or even unconscious manner. We return to Michael Polanyi (2009) who probably would suggest that our heuristics and other middle-burner habitual processes are known only “tacitly.” This means that we can probably learn what they are, how they operate, and when they are operating, but this requires that we pay close attention and that we think critically about our thinking. This so-called “meta-level reasoning” is not easy to do—and it must be engaged by our prefrontal cortex (which might not be present at the time when our heuristics and habitual thinking are in full operation). Polanyi identifies this front-burner process as “explicit processing” and the material being produced by this processing as “Explicit Knowledge”.

Whether we are using Polanyi's term, the term being use by the behavioral scientists (Heuristics) or the other term we used above (expository memory), the task we are facing is daunting, for the second system of memory (procedural) that we have identified is fully in charge. This system operates when we are engaged in some behavior (or thought process) that is routine in nature. It is quite valuable (much as heuristics are valuable) when we are navigating our everyday life.

For instance, when we have been driving a car for many years, we should not focus on our driving but should instead pay attention to the conditions surrounding the car we are driving (other cars, turns in the road, weather conditions). Our procedural brain will take care of the driving (steering, accelerating, minor braking). Similarly, when we have been golfing for many years, there is no need to focus on the way we are holding our club and when we are reading as adults, we concentrate on the concepts being conveyed or story being told, not on the meaning of each individual word. We need our expository memory when learning how to drive or how to read, but not when we are skilled drivers and experienced readers.

This procedural system has often been equated with habitual behavior—and with the deployment of heuristics. We have long known that habits are hard to break. We know now that the procedural brain and the habits that this brain maintains are very powerful. In their book, *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath (2010) describe this procedural system as an elephant that is being controlled (with minimal effect) by the rider (the expository brain). The rider of an elephant can use all of his or her energy in trying to control the elephant but will often end up exhausted and minimally influential. The elephant will go where it wants to.

It seems that the resistance to breaking up habitual behavior is based in large part on the requirement that we move our cortical operations from one system (procedural) to another (expository) – and this is very difficult. We will be deskilled for a period of time (often extended period of time) while we learn a new way of behaving and while we establish new habits that can eventually be turned over to our procedural brain. Thus, inertia in human behavior is based not in some superficial resistance to doing something new, but rather in a much more profound requirement that we shift from one operating system in the brain to a different operating system.

So, where is this vital – but often problematic—middle burner located. As the name suggests, it is located between two major areas of the human brain. Actually, it is not located in any specific location. It is instead an elaborate system of neural links between an older part of the brain (the limbic system) and the newest part of the brain (primarily the prefrontal and other frontal areas of the brain). Given its middle position and the vital role it plays as a conduit between two big-time cortical systems, the middle burner should never be ignored. It often tells us what to do, even when the advice it provides isn't of benefit to us. The challenge for us is to discern when we should follow the advice being offered by this middle-burner expert and when to freshen up, get unstressed and become reflective practitioners—so that our front burner expert is once again offering us valuable advice. Good luck—for the food being cooked on the middle-burner often complements the food being cooked on the back burner. A tasty (but often toxic) stew can be served when the middle-burner and back-burner fares are combined.

Back Burners

This brings us to the back burner – which is the most fascinating of the three sets of burners. It has been the subject of many novels, movies and TV programs (especially soap operas). Psychoanalysts and many other mental health practitioners have made their living trying to help their clients (patients) learn something about and find ways to work with (if not manage) the culinary fare being produced on these burners.

Part of the fascination and charm of the back burner is its free-flowing nature. While the front burner tends to operate in a systematic, rational manner and the middle burner operates in a rigid, habitual manner, the back burner is almost fiery in its spontaneity and flickering manner. We find in the processes of our back burner the interplay of order and chaos that is the focus of many contemporary studies of complex systems. Put simply, the processes of the back burner are highly dynamic and certainly complex. This means that these burners are potent sources of rich insight—as long as we are careful and circumspect in our review of and potential use of these insights. We must inquire about the true nature of anything that is threatening (will this really harm me?) or “shadowy” (what is really going

on here?). We must also dig deeper into that which gives us hope (what really are the chances that this will work?) or that which motivates us (why does this really appeal to me?).

There is another metaphoric way in which to describe the operations of our back burner: it is operating like a carnival. Complete with the loss of inhibitions, the diverse display of emotions, and the presence of both soothsayers and sage wizards. Beware of charlatans when wandering through a carnival. However, also avail yourself of the rich source of ideas and images from many different worlds that are attracted to and intermingle at this often-hidden carnival operating inside our self.

Those who study creative processes and psychodynamic, or unconscious dynamics operating in the human psyche often devote considerable attention to the carnival-like operations of the back burner. For instance, it is often proposed that the elusive phenomenon called Incubation operates out of the back burner. We have the beginning of an idea regarding a new work of art, sales strategy, or topic for an upcoming lecture series. This preliminary idea gets set aside in favor of challenges we must face in our immediate life and work. This idea, however, might not simply fade away; rather, it might travel to the back burner and be bounced around in the chaos (and unique order) of the carnival. The idea expands in size and scope.

Then, one day, the idea pops up in nearly finished form while we are standing in the shower stall, driving to work, or simply relaxing with a glass of wine and a song being sung by our favorite singer. We step out of the shower and look for a pad of dry paper. We pull the car over to the side of the road (or dangerously try to write something down while driving). We step into our home office and record the idea on our computer. This is the process of incubation at work. Apparently, we often need to be relaxed or distracted for the idea to move from the back burner to our front burner, where our rational brain can review, modify and polish the idea. Our expository brain can help us place the idea in a broader context and relate it to other experiences and other matters of concern in our life. We are primed for both creativity and new learning.

The psychoanalysts use somewhat different terms when describing what is occurring on the back burner. One of the most gifted of these analysts, George Klein (1967), introduces the concept of preemptory ideation. He suggests that there are thoughts with some emotional and conceptual baggage and energy which begins traveling through our head and heart. It gathers up new content while on this journey and will often appear partially or even fully formed (like the ideas emerging from incubation) when we are relaxing or are in a reflective mood (such as when we are participating in psychotherapy).

It is not hard to locate the back burners in our brain. The back burner operates primarily out of our limbic system (one of the two cortical regions being linked by the middle burners). This area of the brain serves many cortical functions. However, two of these functions are particularly important when we are attending to what happens on the back burners. These two functions are memory and the appraisal of threat. It is interesting (and perhaps important) to note that these two functions are located in adjacent cortical structures—the hippocampus and amygdala. One might justifiably hypothesize that memory has served an important survival function in its close affiliation with threat appraisal. We might have primarily needed our memory when living on the African Savannah in order to recall what is likely to be dangerous.

We would take this one step further. The threat-appraisal function being primarily served by the Amygdala might have provided us with our initial way of viewing our world—and even our first heuristic. As Charles Osgood (1957) found many years ago, much of our way of categorizing the world in which we live comes down to just three criteria. First, is the entity we are encountering interested in our welfare or are they interested in doing us harm (the good/bad criterion). Second, is this entity as powerful as I am or could I defeat it if necessary (the strong/weak criterion). Third, is this entity active and fast or is it inactive and/or slow. Could I outrun it if necessary (the active/passive criterion)? Osgood proposed that these three criteria still dominate our thinking and acting—even though we no longer live on the African Savannah.

The Limbic System is dominated by the Amygdala and the Hippocampus—at least when it comes to our emotions and memory. The Limbic System, in turn, is one of the oldest parts of the brain. It provides us through the Amygdala and Hippocampus with some particularly important sources of internally generated expert insights. Much as they do in the case of Osgood’s three criteria of threat, the Amygdala and Hippocampus provide templates for the immediate appraisal of certain challenging conditions. Pattern-recognition is engaged to determine if something is “right” or “wrong.” Is what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell as it “should be” or is something amiss?

Jonah Lehrer (2009) writes about the wisdom that can be found in the Limbic System and illustrates the existence and valuable use of this wisdom in the detection of an enemy missile firing during the Gulf War. A sailor on an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea was reviewing blips on a radar screen and “sensed” that there was something wrong. He sensed something very subtle on his screen that ended up being an enemy missile that was trying to track as an American aircraft returning to the ship. The missile was shot down and the lives of many people were saved. The sailor’s detection was so sensitive that it took extended replay of the radar signals to detect the anomaly.

At a less dramatic or life-saving level, we all can recall detecting something that is wrong about what we are taking in from our multiple senses. We “know” that something is wrong with the food we are eating, or something has been moved in our bathroom or bedroom. We sense that the man we just met again for the first time in five years has somehow “changed.” Has he lost weight or is he perhaps ill? No, it is the absence of the beard he was wearing five years ago. We know that something is different.

The dimension of Tacit Knowledge that we identified at the start of this essay applies here. Polanyi specifically used this example of “knowing” that something is different in the person we meet to illustrate the existence of tacit knowledge. The knowledge becomes explicit when we recognize that the beard is gone when the person that we meet mentions that he saved it off. The knowledge moves from our template-matching back burner to the front burner where we interact (better informed) with our now-beardless acquaintance.

The carnival offers additional acts and images that come from even more diverse sources – even (potentially) outside our self. Carl Jung is considered by many experts of unconscious life to be someone who best understands (and may have lived for a while) in the back burner domain. Having written about and drawn detailed, vivid portraits of residents and images of the unconscious in his *Red Book (Liber Novus)* (2009), Jung focuses not only on the masculine (animus) and feminine (anima) forces and figures

that motivate our conscious life (potentially including our incubative life), but also on deeply embedded guides (such as Philemon, his own personal guide). It is these later figures of the unconscious that can be experts for us regarding how to use the other experts to be found hanging around our back burners.

Of particular importance (and controversy) is a proposal made by Carl Jung that some of the characters (such as the mother/goddess) and images (such as the mandala) ultimately can be attributed to a source that comes from outside our psyche—and outside our present-day time and location. These are collective archetypes that Jung and his followers believe are somehow transmitted from one generation to the next. They proposed that there is a Collective Unconscious that resides at the foundation of unconscious life in each of us. This certainly can be a source of great expert insight regarding the nature of life and the many psychological challenges we are facing. The fundamental question is: does the collective unconscious actually exist or is it just the case that we wish there was this fountain of wisdom. If we can't find infallible wisdom among the external experts in our world, then perhaps we are keenly in need of a collective source of internal expertise that is wise beyond time or place. If the Collective Unconscious does exist, then we might consider it to be a source of some of the biggest and most influential of the Heuristics identified by Kahneman and other behavioral economists.

We can add one other potential source of internal expertise. The source of this expertise is also collective in nature—but it is more circumscribed. Called the *Social Unconscious* by Haim Weinberg (Hopper and Weinberg, 2019) and his colleagues, this source builds specifically on the shared traumatic experiences of people living in a particular society at a particular point in time. Weinberg finds a social unconscious operating in the Israeli society while Richard Lim (2018) finds it operating in Singapore Society. While the lingering, collective trauma in Israel centers, as one might expect, on the Holocaust, the trauma in Singapore arises from the initial establishment of this now-prospering community as a place where those of Chinese heritage might move as unwanted citizens of Malaysia (and other Southeast Asian countries). What is the lingering, collective impact of being unwanted or even sentenced to death because of religious belief or cultural background? Is there such a thing as social unconscious? And would our awareness of this source of unconscious fears and concerns be of value with regard to expertise we might need in order to live in our own mid-21st Century society.

There are rich sources of wisdom to be found in the domain of our unconscious. Being engaged on our back burner, this personal wisdom potentially combines intensive knowledge that comes from our own personal experiences with extensive knowledge that might be intergenerational in nature. It could be specific to the society in which we live (Social Unconscious) or it could be much more general and enduring in nature (Collective Unconscious).

The riches of the carnival are even greater. We have additional sources of internal expertise to which we might attend. We now know that the Limbic System is itself a waystation that is conveying messages from an even older and more primitive region of the brain to higher level regions of the brain. There is ongoing physical input from all parts of our body that we are monitoring constantly. Based on this monitoring we are adjusting everything from body posture to body temperature. Probably the most important sources of information about our body comes from our guts. At the very least, we know that some of the most extensive neural networking in our body is connecting our gut to our brain. It seems

that our brain and behavior is strongly influenced by what we are eating, how this food is digested, and how and what we are eliminating that was not converted to energy.

Finally, it must be noted that information regarding our bodily functions does not arrive helter-skelter in our brains. As we have noted, the carnival that is playing out on our backburners operates in both a chaotic and orderly manner. While writing about why Descartes made a mistake in separating mind from body, Antonio Damasio (2005) (a noted neurobiologist) points out that we have installed an integrated (and integrative) somatic template in the lower regions of our brain.

This template not only monitors our bodily functions but also constantly sets a general tone regarding how we are “feeling” at any point in time. This general feeling, in turns, profoundly (though subtly, tacitly and often unconsciously) influences all other ways in which we are perceiving and acting in the world. It seems that the somatic template is one of our most important and least often appreciated experts on which we rely on a daily basis in our life. We might look to the meteorological expert on T.V. to inform us of the upcoming external weather, but we rely on our internal somatic template expert to inform us of our current (and probable or potential) internal weather.

The meal being cooked on the back burner is usually savory and richly textured. If we believe that there is a social or even a collective unconscious, then we are likely to find that our culinary fare has been cooking a long time and is flavored with many exotic spices from another era and other cultures. Yet, this is not always the case. Our repast can be bitter of taste and often quite difficult to digest. This is the case if our own personal history and heritage is filled with trauma and abuse.

Resmaa Menakem (2017) writes about this in his remarkable and disturbing account of his grandmother’s hands. As a young man, Resmaa asks his mother why his grandmother’s hands were crippled and deeply callused. His mother told of his grandmother’s life as a young Black woman picking cotton in the American South. The sharply edged boles of the cotton had ravaged her hands. His mother also pointed out that Resmaas’s grandmother finds it hard to walk. Once again as a child she suffered from physical trauma. Without the funds to buy shoes, she walks barefooted in the cotton fields.

Extending this story of trauma, Menakem writes about the transmission of physical trauma from one generation to the next generation. He also suggests that the trauma is transmitted to those who inflicted the trauma—and even to those who are seeking to block (or treat) this abuse. Given this potential transmission, we might ask if the somatic template among these victims, perpetrators, preventors and healers of trauma is bent (or even broken). Are those who are impacted directly or indirectly by trauma constantly (or even periodically) reminded of the trauma—and does this influence the nature and source of internal expertise that they seek and absorb? Do we see through a glass darkly when this glass has been smudged and even warped with trauma?

Personal Sources of Expertise

We can trace out some implications regarding the nature of and access to personal expertise, given this brief foray into the three tiers of mental functioning in the human brain. On the positive side, there are

abundant sources of expertise to be found inside our own psyche. It seems that each of us is working on multiple levels of mental and emotional processing at the same time. We have only to choose which level and which content that will receive our attention at any one time. On the negative side, we are vulnerable to leakage between the levels. This can, in turn, lead to major, unacknowledged distortion in the personal expertise we find in our multi-tiered psyche.

The distortion is likely to be particularly great if the leakage comes from one of the lower tiers to one of the higher tiers. While the lower tiers are filled with wisdom that has accumulated over many generations, they are also filled with the ghosts, goblins and biases of our personal past and, potentially, our collective past. We might find, for example, that our suspicions about the motives of a colleague might relate more to his physical appearance or tone of voice than to any actual actions they have taken. We might be recollecting the style and sound of an unscrupulous uncle from our childhood. Conversely, the way in which we always seem to be wounded when leaving meetings with a seemingly “nice” colleague might be worth our reflections. Are we the “victim” of psychological “razor cuts” inflicted by the subtle humor and indirect “put-downs” of this colleague? Sometimes, we need to pay attention to these skillfully inflicted wounds. Ultimately, we are the “experts” of our own personal fears and wounds.

As a result, we must attend to all the burners on our mental stove. Otherwise, the dish on one of the burners could be burned and our meal could be ruined. Moving away from our metaphor, we could find that we are receiving bad advice if we do not acknowledge that the sources of expertise coming from each of the three tiers may be influencing what we are receiving from any one source. We must look for biases, untested assumptions and other distortions of reality. In other words, we must think “slowly” when accessing personal expertise.

Discernment

Given the multiple tiers from which we can derive personal expertise—and given the leakage from one tier to another, we are required to be discerning in our selection of a specific source of expertise and in the way in which we make use of this expertise. We borrow the concept of Discernment from the mystics of Medieval Europe. While these mystics (usually of Christian persuasion) were gifted in picking up messages from God, they also were picking up messages from Satan. Their task was to determine (discern) what comes from “God” and what from Satan. This was quite a challenging task—but it was critical if the religious advice being delivered by these mystics was to be of benefit to Christian worshippers.

We reintroduce the insights regarding unconscious life that Carl Jung (2013) offers us. He provides us with the opportunity to learn from one of the other unconscious psychic functions that he identified. This is the *Shadow*. Jungians suggest that the Shadow serves as a counter-function to our Persona (the mask that enables us to appear competent and compassionate). It is our Shadow that can serve as a jokester (forcing us to stumble, bumble and simply appear to be a fool). It is our Shadow that does the hard work of deflating our ego (when it grows too big). This is not only the only psychic service being provided by the Shadow—though it is the service receiving the greatest attention (and is often a great source of annoyance and embarrassment for us).

The shadow provides rich insights into the flaws and failures of other people in our life – especially as they relate to our own flaws and failures. This psychic function also helps us reframe the various forces operating on us from outside. The shadow is of particular value when we are assessing outside forces that each of us initially and habitually (fast-thinking) consider to be evil or at least of little positive value. Stephen Sondheim speaks to this function (or actually writes verse about this function) in his musical, *Into the Woods*, which focused on our unconscious life (the woods). One of his characters near the end of this musical declares that “witches can be right” and “giants can be good.” Our shadow can help us with this critical process of discernment regarding the witches and giants in our own life and work.

Our shadow can help us identify the positive side of getting fired, or the valuable lessons we can learn from a failure to successfully complete a project. We can even gain insights from our shadow function regarding such ugly matters as divorce, bankruptcy, and illness. What are we to find out about ourselves from these “soulful” challenges to our sense of self-worth and life ambitions? We don’t need an expert from outside our self to pose important and painful questions that require our reflection and self-honesty. The shadow that lingers in the pit of our stomach and in the nightmares of our night will provide these points of inquiry at no cost (other than some pain and suffering on our part).

Multiple Voices

The shadow constitutes only one of the many voices to be heard at each of the tiers. We must make sense of the ways in which the multiple voices are manifest—and ways in which we can make most effective use of these voices as sources of personal expertise. At this point we introduce another psychoanalytic source—the object relations theorists (who come out of the psychoanalytic camp and its focus on unconscious processes in the human psyche). They are seeking to make sense of the multiple voices operating in the unconscious domain of our psyche.

According to those offering an object relations perspective, our internal space is filled with competing voices and images (psychic objects). They often are aligned with our polarized perspectives regarding those people who are “right” and “good” and those who are “wrong” and “bad.” There are no gray areas or middle grounds. People are all right or all wrong. They are all good or all bad. This is a powerful psychological outcome called “splitting.”

We now know that many of these polarized people (representing primitive “objects” in our unconscious mind) were installed in our psyche during the early years of childhood. They often focus specifically on the multiple (and often contradictory) roles played by the person who served as the “mother” during our infancy. Therapists who embrace this perspective believe that their patients should attend to these competing infantile voice and images in order to determine which are helpful and still valid in their adult life. The purpose of therapy is often directed to divorcing the powerful influence of these internal objects so that a client can more clearly and consistently attend to the real world in which they live and work.

One of the noted object relations practitioners, Michael Balint, actually applied this perspective to his work with physicians and other professionals. When engaged, the Balint Group Method (Otten, 2017) typically involves the identification of various internal voices that are operating when a specific physician

encounters a particularly difficult and elusive clinical issue. These diverse, often contradictory and at times “shadowy” voices are presented to other members of a Balint Group and members of this group then are assigned specific roles, with each member taking on one of the voices. An enactment of the internal conversation among the voices then takes place with each member of the group verbalizing the voice they have been assigned and interacting with the other voices in a rich and often insightful dialogue regarding the presenting clinical issue.

The person presenting this issue listens to the dialogue and when it is finished reflects on what has been learned. The external enactment of the internal dialogue can be a rich source of learning for the physician (as well as other members of the Balint Group). Critical (often collective) discernment can take place in a supportive, public setting. Personal sources of expertise are now explicit. No longer held in a tacit manner, personal expertise can now be viewed in a new way by the physician with the assistance of their Balint Group colleagues. We would suggest that this Balint process can be of value when engaged in many other settings. We have found this to be the case in our own work with the Balint Method. The Balint Group can be of particular value when engaged to enhance the benefits derived from personal expertise.

Outside the psychoanalytic world, we find a similar theme conveyed by many authors who (like Balint) are portraying a noisy dialogue that is operating within the head (and heart) of their protagonist. For example, we find this description in the novels of Pulitzer-prize winning Marilynne Robinson (particularly *Jack*) and graphically portrayed in the theatrical productions of Pulitzer-prize winning Arthur Miller (particularly *The Death of a Salesman*). We find that Truman Capote (1994) offers an especially insightful portrayal of dialogue-filled unconscious life. He writes about Voices from other rooms that are often pushed aside or silenced during our youth but demand attention during our mature years.

While Capote is concentrating on the voices that are silenced or muffled, we can also point to those voices that operate at the other end of the vocal spectrum. We often only hear the loudest, most powerful of the voices—especially when we are faced with time-pressures and/or stress. In responding to these loud voices that often come from the media (especially cable channels and internet sites), we move to fast thinking and attend that source of expertise that is most readily available. This certainly is not one of the voices from our back home (unconscious)—voices that speak of deferred past dreams or ambitious dreams that have been abandoned in favor of expedience (Bergquist, 2012).

Sadly, these voices of lower amplitude often yield the most important advice and the kind of personal expertise that requires a quiet place for reflection and a slowing of the thought processes. Their source is often the printed media (especially long, scholarly essays) and public media (television and radio). Policy documents (“white papers”), commission reports, and findings reported by nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations are likely to remain unread. The “experts” who report on (and interpret) these findings are likely to provide only partial (and selective) reviews.

Personal Expertise: Opportunities and Challenges

Given the opportunities inherent in and risks associated with accessing personal expertise, we turn to the ways in which this most intimate form of expertise can be engaged to address several of the most important challenges that we are facing in our mid-21st Century life. We turn specifically to those challenges that we identified at the start of this essay. These are the challenges that arise when we are making choices, when we are expressing our opinion about something, and when we are seeking fully to understand how another person is seeing and living in the world. These personal and interpersonal concerns require each of us to attend from several internal sources of expertise. We must, in turn, attend slowly and critically to these sources of personal expertise—to ensure that they provide us with valid and useful advice. We now devote some time and attention to each of these challenges.

Choice and Slow Thinking

When we are making choices about what we believe and how we subsequently act on this belief (e.g. when we purchase something) then we can attend from an assumption of and aspiration regarding being free in arriving at the belief. As we have noted, behavioral scientists such as Daniel Kahneman speak of the deliberative, slow thinking process that must accompany this reflective process if we are truly to be free in engaging our own personal expertise.

This reflection is critical, for instead of the heuristics being imposed by others, who are in authority (have power), we might be inclined to impose our own heuristics on ourselves. Put simply, each of us can escape from freedom (Fromm, 1941) by either complying with the externally imposed heuristics or quickly and uncritically grabbing onto our own favorite, energy-saving and thought-saving heuristic. It is indeed tempting to stay with the presumptive heuristic. However, at the moment when we resort to this heuristic and to fast thinking, we have forfeited the opportunity to access personal expertise. We fall away from our personal wisdom when we accept the first piece of expert advice that we receive or when we listen only to the loudest or most dramatically conveyed expertise.

Finding Voice

During the 1980s, Carol Gilligan (1982) and her colleagues at the Stone Center in Wellesley Massachusetts wrote about the developmental challenge associated with finding one's genuine voice—especially as this voice is engaged in connected relationships with other people. While Gilligan is focused particularly on the challenges that women face in finding their voice, we would suggest that this is a developmental challenge, ultimately, for all of us. If we are to access our personal expertise then we must find what it is that we truly believe and that we can articulate clearly and in a compelling fashion to other people – particularly in a manner that furthers trust with other people. It is with this personal honesty that we can establish a deeply trusting and supportive relationship with another person. It usually takes an interplay between the deeply embedded values existing on our middle burners, along with the critical thinking and discernment found in our front burners to arrive at this honesty.

Several of Carol Gilligan's colleagues wrote a book at about the same time that Gilligan was advocating the finding of voice among women. These women (Belenky and others, 1986) offered a powerful account of women who must remain silent because of the constraints placed on them by their society. They asked how these women of silence would come to know anything. Can one engage in the

acquisition of knowledge—can one learn—when there is no active verbal engagement with other people? Is a person ever able to access their personal expertise if they can never speak or engage with other people in knowledge-generating and inner-knowledge reaffirming discourse? We would suggest that the answer is “No.” Both internally and externally generated knowledge requires engagement and the creation of shared knowledge. We might even consider interactions with other people to be the basis for not only our sense of self, but also our sense of reality (Brothers, 2001). There is little access to personal expertise and certainly little ability to critically review the personal expertise that is accessed without this clear sense of self and ultimately a consistent sense of reality.

Empathy and Shared Reality

The engagement with other people also provides us with the opportunity to gain an accurate sense of how they see reality and how the two of us might construct and act upon a shared reality. Together we can build and critically review each of our personal sources of expertise. All of this requires what psychologists call a *Theory of Mind*—which is the capacity of human beings as they mature to understand other people by ascribing mental states to them.

For most of us, at an early age, we come to acknowledge that the other person with whom we are interacting is engaged themselves in complex thinking and reasoning. They have a mind—just as we do. Most importantly, there are specific feelings that arise from their thinking and reasoning. This, in turn, means that we can empathize with them – for we are aware of our own feelings and often have some idea regarding the source of these feelings (and related thoughts). We are ill-prepared to deal with other people if we don’t have a rather elaborate theory of mind regarding these people.

While the development of a theory of mind is usually assumed to be a cognitive task for early childhood, we propose that this theory often fails us later in life. This theory has to be frequently re-learned and re-engaged as we encounter people who are “different” from us in many ways. It is often hard to create a theory of mind that can be applied to those who are “Others.” A sharing of personal expertise with other people requires that we meet this cognitive (and affective) challenge in a successful manner.

In the midst of a highly polarized environment and faced with the challenges and pervasive anxiety found in mid-21st Century life, it is tempting (even compelling) to disregard the “Other” as a thinking and feeling person. They become a simple political opponent or a menacing enemy that must be defeated at all costs. The in-group(s) and out-group(s) are formed and the line is drawn between those we include and those we exclude. In such a setting, our personal expertise is rarely shared or critically reviewed in collaboration with people who view the world differently from our self. The line is never crossed on behalf of exploring an alternative perspective.

Making use of the insights offered by Wilfred Bion (1961) regarding the basic assumptions we hold about other people, the “Other” becomes an adversary that evokes a fight response (if they are not too strong) or a flight response (if they are very strong). We can combine the perspectives of Bion (a psychoanalyst) and the behavioral scientists by suggesting that Bion’s basic assumptions are deeply held (often unconscious) heuristics that can uncritically guide our actions and smother any formation of a theory of mind regarding the “Other.” As an adversary, the “Other” provokes this most powerful and

primitive amygdala-based heuristic. The template of good/bad, strong/weak and active/passive overwhelms our own critical faculties. Our prefrontal cortex is shut off (or ignored) with regard to the validity and appropriate use of this template. Our theory of mind is abandoned. We find massive leakage of content and expertise from the middle burners to the front burners. We are no longer of much use to either our self or the community in which we live and work.

We can counter this tacitly held assumption of flight/flight—but it takes a lot of work. The hard work is worth the effort, however, for we are likely to find valuable access to our own personal expertise when we are seeking to understand what the world might look like from the perspective of someone we fear or hate. Are they just evil (with nothing inside their head and heart other than murderous intent) or is there something there that we might understand and even acknowledge residing in our own head and heart? This engagement of a theory of mind regarding the “Other” is indeed a challenge. Yet, the insights it generates regarding our own assumptions, biases and fears (that reside on our back burners) can be brought to consciousness (front burner) and tested against external reality as well as our own best instincts regarding justice and equity of treatment. We become better people when we take on this challenge.

Conclusions

Given the abundance of content and sources of expertise to be found inside our self, there is an important but often quite difficult decision to make on an ongoing basis regarding what we do with this content and attendant expertise. We propose that three options are available to us. First, we can adopt a solipsistic stance and rely solely (or at least extensively) on the personal sources. This stance is taken when we fail to trust any or the external sources of information and expertise. We believe that most, if not all, of the experts in our mid-21st Century world are biased, corrupt or simply ignorant. Why listen to the shouts (and whispers) that are saturating—and polluting—our environment. The media is not to be trusted and there is so much polarization and contradiction among the so-called “scholars” and “researchers” that there is nowhere to turn for the “truth” – so we choose to rely on our own internal instincts and knowledge acquired over many years of engagement in the outside world of warped reality.

The second option leads us in the opposite direction. We choose to rely exclusively (or at least extensively) on information and expertise coming from the outside world. We make this choice either because we don’t trust what is coming from inside our self or because someone in the external world offers a vision of reality that is fully aligned with our internal “truths.” We often do not trust our own internal sources of information and expertise because we have been wounded repeatedly in life and find that our internal wisdom is often based in nothing more (or less) than our attempt to cope with and potentially heal the wounds. Trauma distorts our sense of reality and often leads us to rely uncritically on some outside source that might help us with the trauma or at least not wound us once again. The external expert offers reassurance (you are not alone), hope (your trauma will not linger in you forever) and even treatment (I/we can help you heal).

The matter of alignment between our internal world and the external world is particularly prevalent and troubling. If pervasive, this alignment can lead to the emergence of an authoritarian society in which

there is one and only one reality. It is a charismatic leader, such as Hitler (in 1930s Germany) or Huey Long (in 1930s America) who can offer words that not only ring in our inner psychic chambers but also lessen our fears and activate our own deeply embedded images. The complex world becomes simple. The threats are clarified—and we are reassured that they will soon cease to exist. The words and images being conveyed by the charismatic leader might hitch on to the peremptory train of ideation proposed by George Klein. If there is a social or collective unconscious, the images embedded in this unconscious might be activate.

A synergy is produced which leads us to rely solely on the reality being conveyed by this leader. We no longer need to devote time and energy to surfacing our internal expertise. We no longer need to think slowly. Instead, we sit back or we march forward—propelled by the external message regarding what is “really” happening in the world and what actions we should take collectively to address those elements of the “real” world that need to be corrected or eliminated. Our fast-thinking reigns supreme—on behalf of allegiance to the one true leader and one true truth.

The third option requires us to choose a path which is much harder to traverse. As we have proposed in other essays in this series on the crisis of expertise, it is important when engaging this option that we access and make use of our internal sources of information and expertise in conjunction with our access and use of external sources. We engage Kahneman’s slow thinking when discerning what is valid and useful expertise coming from one of our three mental tiers and how this personal expertise relates to and helps to affirm (or disconfirm) the validity and usefulness of this external expertise. Furthermore, as we will be proposing in our companion essay, great wisdom can be found in collective rather than isolated, individual sources of external expertise. This collective wisdom may be a fine complement to the rich sources of expertise that we find inside our self.

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