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The Will to Learn

Jennifer was eager to discover how college could benefit her. Day after day, she sat in the classroom, waiting for something her professors said to have an impact. By the end of the semester nothing dramatic had happened and she was disappointed. She approached one of her professors and asked, "Is this all there is?" The professor looked at her a moment and answered, "For you, apparently so."

As simple as it is, this story contains an important truth for all potential students to learn: you cannot depend solely on others to educate you. If you do, you are making yourself vulnerable to a system that will frustrate you with its inevitable inefficiencies and imperfections. You'll enjoy your educational experience more and get more benefit if you realize that most real education is *self*-education insofar as it is *you* who decides how much and how well you will learn.

Learning is a partnership of two or more willing minds. Your teachers can assist you with information and guidance, but much of the responsibility to learn is on your shoulders. If you welcome this responsibility, you will exercise more control over your college experience, both in and out of the classroom. Then, even if some of your instructors fail to meet *their* responsibilities in the partnership, you can still salvage the situation from *your* side.

Having more control will make you feel more fully involved, and feeling more involved will make you more enthusiastic about your education; as a result, you will not only increase your capacity to learn but will probably enjoy the process more. You will also experience a greater sense

of freedom and direction. But first you must understand what the process of learning involves.

In this chapter, I will focus on the most basic ingredient in learning: motivation. Other chapters will introduce you to other skills and traits that are part of improving and deepening the learning process. The end result will be to introduce you to experiencing learning as a seemingly effortless and exciting activity in which you are so absorbed in what you are doing that you lose the feeling that you are *working* at it. You may already know that feeling in a fleeting way, but the intent of this book is to get you ready to make that experience a way of life. It is not magical but is rather the result of your physical and mental powers coordinating for top-level performance. However, there *is* hard work to be done to get you there. Take it a step at a time and do not skip any steps.

Being a Student

What does it mean to be a student? Many people equate it with being “brainy,” but learning has little to do with being born intellectually gifted. It has everything to do with the attitude you take in controlling and broadening your own experience as you set out to master complex information. There are skills involved. Although you have been a “student” most of your life, the skills taught to you are probably rather basic, enough to get by in the classroom and move along from one grade to the next. Perhaps you have even managed to get good grades, but it is commonly believed among education specialists that much of what you have “learned” in the traditional format you may not retain or be able to recall when you need it. “We fill students full of data,” says Richard Paul, who directs a center for critical thinking in California. “But the essence of education is to use information to address new situations. We’re neglecting that.”

The problem is partly due to the way we understand what it means to learn, which does not account for what it means to be a student in the deeper sense of the word. True

learning means to adopt an attitude of striving to integrate your mental skills toward the end of achieving competence *and quality* in what you think, say and do, and to continue to be open to broadening your perspective and understanding of the world around you. To develop as a student means to be open to the *process* of learning, as much as—perhaps even more than—to the results. The process and the goals go hand in hand, and while goals are important, so much as been said about them and so little about process—the *experience* of learning—that it is time to give the process its due.

You play a stronger role in what you get out of your college experience than you may realize. In order to keep from falling back on the unproductive expectations Jennifer expressed in the opening example, you must focus on your own attitudes and skills.

It may seem to you as if attitude is a simple thing: it's either positive or negative and obviously affects your perspective. However, that's a little too simple. Consider several different attitudes to the same task, a homework assignment in a basic English course. One student says that he is working to get it over with so he can stop worrying about it; another student says she is working to get an A on the assignment; a third student claims that doing well on the assignment is a step toward doing well in the course; and a fourth student says she is using the assignment to help her eventually to write an important novel. So you see, it is not just a matter of being positive or negative. Attitudes also play a part in the degree of interest you take in what you envision for yourself and in how you motivate yourself.

Learning what it means to become a student in the manner offered to you in this book will mean putting yourself in a position that may seem to you unnecessary. You may think you are being asked to learn something that you believe you already know. However, you may be surprised to discover that as a student, you are, in some respects, a beginner. You may know how to read a book, write a paper and even make a classroom presentation, but you undoubtedly have never been taught to master the

inner dynamic of learning that can move you beyond the basics with which you “get by” toward a sense of true mastery and heightened experience. Keeping this goal in mind, let us look at the first step: staying motivated in the initial experience of a new situation.

Motivation to Learn

It is difficult to be a beginner in an impatient society. You are pressured to learn quickly, without taking too long in the transition between first acquaintance with a subject or skill and full understanding. This is one reason why many people begin a project but fail to complete it. It is also the reason many products are inferior. The difference in quality is obvious between the chair carved out by the true artisan and one produced on an assembly line for cheap distribution. Artisans develop an intimate relationship with their products, based on care and patience. It is not just an object to them but part of themselves. There may be a difference in price, but you “get what you pay for,” and that applies to your approach to education as well. The price you pay may be your own change of habits.

The question to ask yourself is whether you want short-range, immediate gains or the long-term benefits that result from the kind of commitment true artisans make to their handiwork. You must make that decision for yourself. No counselor, advisor, parent or high school teacher can tell you what you want. What I will call the art of inner learning begins with *your* desire to achieve what it can offer you.

It is not necessarily an easy decision to make. The requirements of time and effort may seem intimidating. Like defying the force of gravity in the first stages of an astronaut’s liftoff, the initial steps will be the most difficult. Many students do opt for the “assembly line” approach, to the great frustration of their teachers and, eventually, of the students themselves. Why? Is it because they don’t *want* to make the effort? Or is it because the educational system

makes the effort seem futile? Blame has been placed on both sides, but it seems more clearly to be the case that somewhere in the whirlwind of activity calculated to get you in and out of high school and college, the art of learning has been *assumed*. Being assumed, it has been lost and many of its ingredients have been separated from one another and scattered. It is like a secret that must be rediscovered, or a missing part that needs to be reconnected.

There is no quick, easy formula. In a culture where responsibility is too easily laid on the shoulders of others, you must be reminded that a key factor in learning is motivation, and motivation is controlled from *within*.

There are many motives for going to college: You want a degree that will get you a better job and more money; your parents want you to go to college; you want to be with your friends, who are going away to college; you want to give yourself an advantage over someone else; or, perhaps some time in high school, you discovered a genuine desire to expand your knowledge. Whatever your reasons, once in college, you must develop a hunger to learn if you are to commit yourself to getting the most advantage out of being there.

All of our experiences, including what we become interested in doing, are molded by the way we think about them. In the example above, outlining various attitudes, the student who just wanted to get the assignment over with was much less involved in actually learning from it or enjoying it than the student who viewed it as a means to fulfilling one of her dreams. In that way, you exercise some control. You can create intellectual hunger by developing an attitude that feeds a desire for it, and that attitude can start with simple curiosity.

It is curiosity that will initially lead you into the classroom. You want to know what a professor will be like, how he or she will cover the subject, how much work will be involved. You may simply be curious about the other students. However, to persevere on a day-to-day basis, you need more than curiosity. You have to cultivate from it the *desire* to become more involved. Otherwise you may not

last to the end of your first year. Your initial investment of time and money will be lost. You may become like the student, Jerry, who endured four years of what he felt was drudgery merely for the sake of getting a degree. He graduated with little more than exhaustion, debts, and an aversion to further education. It would be easy to blame the large classrooms or the lack of individual attention. However, Jerry had more of a part in his boredom than he wants to admit.

Although the desire to learn may begin with curiosity, it is best fed by an open, eager, and flexible mind. Doug was a freshman who had planned out his entire college curriculum in his first semester. He had decided what classes he would take and what ones he would avoid based on his interests of the moment. He did not yet know all that was out there to learn, although he believed that he knew very well what he wanted to do. Then, in his sophomore year, he took a course that had borderline relevance to his goals. To his surprise, he became so enthused that he shot off in another direction altogether. By his junior year, he had developed yet a third direction and had completely lost track of his "system."

The desire to learn is the foundation to the desire to succeed. Wanting to *know* empowers you to do whatever is necessary. While you may be "just one" of several hundred students crammed into a massive classroom auditorium, you can retain your motivation while you are developing your long-range skills by giving yourself some initial success with several techniques: reinterpreting material, making yourself visible, using discipline, and recharging your interest.

1) *Reinterpret the material into your own frame of reference, and keep expanding it.* It is all too easy to dismiss a subject, especially in a required course, as being irrelevant to anything you want to do. However, a subject that seems irrelevant may actually be related to other subjects that do interest you. For example, knowledge and mastery of computers is intricately related to logic (usually offered in the philosophy department). Computer technology is also

touched by math, ethics, cognitive psychology, and the dynamics of learning a language. You may not see the connections unless you actively look for the value in the course. The will to learn is the discipline to search any subject for something that can weave into your primary concerns; it is also the will to allow your interests to expand into more directions and other fields. Additionally, it is the desire to go beyond a given subject and learn for the sheer joy of discovery.

Consider the story of Charles, told by psychologist Philip Barker. Charles' parents loved to walk on the beach each night to enjoy the ocean and the health benefits. Charles was uninterested in either, yet he had to accompany them because he was too young to stay at home by himself. He wandered along, looking at his feet. One day he noticed an unusual shell. He picked it up and took it to school to read about it in the library. The information was so interesting that he looked forward to the next walk on the beach to find more shells. He soon became more involved in the daily ritual than his parents were.

The story teaches us that there may be interesting things to learn even in classes we dislike if we keep our eyes open. You never know what you might discover.

Susan, a physical therapy major who was nearly finished with her program, attended a philosophy course just to find out what Socrates had said and whether it might have any impact on her thinking. She was interested in going beyond the curriculum that had been set up for her by her advisor, and she was able to find exciting connections that were not obvious to others. In contrast, Joe, a philosophy major, was interested only in what his favorite philosopher had to say. He paid attention to nothing else. For him, not only was the vast subject of philosophy closed off, but so was everything else in the college curriculum.

Your personal frame of reference can give useful context and meaning to new material, but be open to broadening it. Use your frame of reference but don't allow it to cut you off from opportunities.

2) *Make yourself visible to the professor.* Ask questions.

Attend office hours. Express your interest. Few professors will ignore sincere students. Dig for more information than the textbook or lecture yields. If you *really* want to know (as opposed to just wanting to impress the professor), you will increase both your scholastic and personal advantages. You are in that classroom for *your* sake. Keep your own priorities in mind.

3) *Use discipline as an aid.* It can help you to set priorities by keeping your goals in focus. Discipline is a negative word in our culture, but it does not have to be. You can change your attitude about it and allow it to become a positive part of your motivation by finding ways to see it as a means of gaining rewards.

4) *You must also learn the importance of recharging your interest.* Even the most enthusiastic student can get stale. Learn to keep a balance. Take a break from studying. Talk over your ideas with friends. Take the weekend and go to the beach or into the city or down the canyon or camping in the woods. Break routines. Read a detective novel. Sometimes the worst thing you can do for your enthusiasm is to overlearn. When your mouth is full of food to the point where you are no longer getting nourishment because you cannot chew, the thing to do is to take a break rather than to stuff more in.

In summary, the desire to learn is the development of curiosity, enthusiasm, discipline, balance, and the ability to stay open to new ideas and experiences. The first two will get you through the early stages of mastering the art, and the others will help to maintain learning as a productive lifetime habit. It is important that you take steps to motivate yourself as you move through the process involved in the art of inner learning.

It may be less frustrating if you view your approach to learning as you would to developing any new skill: as something you need for achieving a goal. As with other skills, learning involves steps and you can get through them more easily, and with less frustration, if you can turn the activity into a challenge, a means to an end.

A word about success, however: it is important to set

goals, and you will be more motivated if you believe that learning this process will help you to succeed with your goals, but you will do better if you focus on the process. In this case, success is like sleep. If you think about it too much or try to force it, it will surely elude you. If, however, you relax and allow it to happen as a result of bettering your skills, your chances are greater for achieving what you desire. That may seem to make little sense, but you will understand it better as we move along. Although I will mention success as a goal for which to strive, keep in mind that it is the process, itself, that should draw your primary attention.

The Beginner's Mind

As I said before, it is difficult to be a beginner, and in some courses, you may experience the frustration and intimidation often associated with situations that call for skills you have not yet developed. Dr. Arnold Lazarus and Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld note in their research on techniques for better performance in any endeavor that two key factors are a receptive state and a positive framework in which to view your situation. You can develop the former by working on the latter.

Consider learning a new and complex game, like chess. First you have to know the rules. Reading through them can be like encountering a foreign language, but you persevere because you want to play a game. You forget the first rule by the time you get to the third, mostly because you have little context with which to make it meaningful. You usually have to read the rules several times, then refer back to them often as you play the game. There may be some frustration but you accept that as part of being a beginner and look forward to honing your skills until you achieve a greater sense of control and mastery.

It is in actually *playing* that you learn best, and if you play against someone who knows the game, you find out all too quickly that knowledge of the rules and the function of the

pieces will rarely (if ever) win you the game. You must also develop strategies and learn to anticipate your opponent's moves. There is an *inner* game going on that transcends the mechanics.

The skill of learning can be similarly frustrating. As a new student, you feel awkward and out of place. You fumble around, trying to figure out how to balance your time, and how to make your mind retain information that seems foreign to you. You may or may not possess the security of past academic success, but even if you do, college is a different game altogether. You have no track record. To the professor, you are just another student. And unlike chess, the rules are not written out for you in a book. You may seek an advisor, but most advice will be general, and not necessarily comprehensible in a situation already overwhelming you with new experiences. Too much advice can be as detrimental as too little. You can become anxious and confused, perhaps homesick for family or friends. Developing the inner control that bears resemblance to the inner game of a chess master can give you a way to handle the confusion.

To get a sense of the stages of the process, think about the experience of learning to drive a car. For some people, the skill is quickly achieved. For others, however, it takes longer, with more frustration along the way, especially with a stick-shift car. The clutch must be mastered while trying to steer, and while remembering where the blinker controls are. If it is raining, you must think about lights and windshield wipers. At the same time, you must keep your speed under control, watch cars in the rearview mirror, and steer clear of other cars and pedestrians. There is an initial period where the machine seems foreign, and there are simply too many instructions to keep straight and remember while negotiating busy streets. As you pick up speed, you must forget everything else in an attempt to keep the car under control. However, as you grow used to it, you relax and enjoy it more. Your college experience can move along similar channels.

The first couple of days of orientation may seem to you

rather complex but certainly masterable. Beware! It will not be long before the pace picks up. Then you may find yourself trying to juggle all sorts of abstract instructions at the same time you are trying to learn the content of several courses. Exams will overtake you before you know it, sometimes within two or three weeks! You may be tempted to give up. That is the trap of the initial stages of being a beginner.

A freshman in a logic course became so frustrated with trying to learn formulas that made no sense to her that she became angry and depressed. She wanted to drop the course but she did not want to think of herself as having failed to grasp something that was supposed to be fairly basic. I urged her to think of another experience that had seemed confusing for her but that she had eventually mastered. She told me about learning how to use a computer. At first, there was so much to remember and nothing seemed to make sense. The commands were in code and there were more keys on the keyboard than there had been on her typewriter. She had made many mistakes and had believed that typing her papers to the keyboard and learned the commands, she realized that she had been wrong; using the computer was much more efficient, flexible, and even more fun than typing, and she was glad she had stuck with it. I told her to keep that experience in mind as she struggled with logic. The same thing could happen for her, once she grew used to working with a new tool. She stayed in the class and eventually the subject became easier for her. As long as she kept in mind that a process involved stages, she was able to stick with it and even to relax and allow herself to get used to it. The more she relaxed, the more easily she absorbed the material. Being depressed and angry only succeeded in hindering her ability to learn.

Before you continue, think about your own experience with a complex skill. Try to recall your initial frustration and your eventual achievement, then keep this experience in mind, like the logic student did with her computer mastery, as you move through this book.

An alternative is to view this stage of the college experi-

ence as a kind of *relationship*, like making a new friend. There may be moments of awkwardness. You may resist making an effort because you fear looking like a fool as you fumble around for something to say. You seek the familiarity of a kindred soul, but to achieve it, you have to go through the first uncomfortable stages of “breaking the ice.” More often than not, your efforts will be rewarded, but the effort must be made in order to receive the reward.

The key is to keep reminding yourself that the early stages are going to be uncomfortable. Try not to blame yourself or become self-critical. You are not at fault. As Socrates says, the truly wise person knows that he does not know. That is the place to begin. Realize that there is a starting point for everything and find a way to “anchor” yourself in the process by remembering that learning to learn is like learning any other skill. Keep yourself actively involved in giving a context to this information in order to allow yourself to experience the first disconcerting stage as a necessary but *temporary* part of the process. Keep your goals in mind so that clumsiness is viewed not as *incompetence* but as merely the initial self-conscious gap between yourself and the tool. Work on reinterpreting the negative idea of “difficulty” as the positive idea of “challenge.” Use past successes, academic or otherwise, to affirm that you have met and conquered challenges. View the uncertainty itself as a new challenge.

A common slogan of lottery games is, “you’ve got to be in it to win it.” The same goes for the experience of learning in college. You have to allow it to make its claim on you, including the initial discomfort. As you get used to it (as with driving a car), what once seemed “too much to remember” can become automatic. The gap between you and the skill of learning begins to close.

Self-as-Instrument

Let’s go back to the driving example. Initially, sitting in the driver’s seat, looking at the steering wheel, the shift, the

pedals, it felt awkward. When you focused on that tricky clutch, you forgot to put on your blinkers to signal to turn. Or while you watched behind to back your car into a parking space, you forgot to watch for the curb and ended up hitting it (or another car). But soon, the nervousness and self-consciousness decreased as your mastery increased. Now you drive without thinking about gear shifts and clutches and blinker lights. You have absorbed the skill into your subconscious, where it stays, unless something like a malfunction in the brakes or mishandling of the shift brings the action to your awareness. For the most part, the skill has become a function of the mind absorbed into the body. It is you, yourself, who are the instrument rather than the steering wheel. You are the *center*. The achievement of this state of skill is the result of technical mastery and of a merging of your own consciousness with whatever it is you are focusing on. Understanding this is the second step, after motivation, toward the *inner* experience of learning.

Take the simpler example of using a typewriter, something that all students must (or should) learn. At first the layout of the keys seems confusing and illogical. It seems extremely unnatural not to look at each key as your finger hits it. But with more practice, you get used to the layout, and soon your fingers become indistinguishable from the keys. It is you who are typing, not the machine. The gap between you and the machine has closed and you are now the instrument. You have *grown into* the skill to the point where you have taken it on as part of yourself.

Mastering skills involves transforming something external and foreign to something internal and intimately connected to you. An analogy would be the difference between observing someone running a computer program and actually running it yourself. You see through different eyes when the keyboard is under your fingers. The *experience* of running a computer program has a different quality than simply listening to someone offer an explanation. Because you feel more *connected* to the experience, it becomes less of an external object. Therefore the more you participate, the more it becomes part of you.

The same idea holds true in the classroom. Gathering facts without personal involvement and connection is like trying to hold grains of sand in your hand. At first, it will seem that you have quite a handful, but eventually most of it will slip away. You may then think that all you need is some sort of container, but what good will it do you to have all that sand sitting around in a container? For the sand to be useful to you, you need to have some purpose in mind, a context that gives it *meaning* and a way to make it *experientially* real to you. The rest of this book will assist you in that regard.

Summary

Professors, subjects, or college settings, do not define learning, rather learning is an extension of life. You can learn no matter where you are. Education neither starts nor stops at the doors of a college or university. Developing a positive and motivating approach to the process of learning will not only help you through your college years, but through post-college careers, and even throughout your life.

The skill of learning, like most skills, involves a period of clumsiness and intimidation while you get used to it. With practice, and motivated by the desire to learn, you will soon close the gap between yourself and the process of learning until you *become* a learner using your mind and body as the primary instruments. Understanding this will move you toward the kind of mastery that is achieved with inner resources.

You will enjoy your education more and you will reap more long-term benefits if you find ways to be involved in it. Experts on peak performance around the world attest to the fact that striving for inner control and satisfaction makes success more likely than striving for success, itself. Achieving success as a result of simply enjoying what you are

doing will make you feel good, and feeling good will make you continue to enjoy learning.

Exercises _____

Before you go on to the next chapter, you will gain some advantage in understanding how the art of inner learning can benefit you if you first take time to assess your own learning style. Attend to each of the following items and describe your approach. From the list, try to assess your motivating values. Try to be as specific as possible. Keep your description to look at when you finish the book:

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|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Studying | 9. Solving problems |
| 2. Reading | 10. Planning your future |
| 3. Asking questions | 11. Setting goals |
| 4. Taking notes | 12. Working with others |
| 5. Organizing notes | 13. Dealing with stress |
| 6. Making important decisions | 14. Asking for help |
| 7. Approaching important tasks | 15. Discussions |
| 8. Approaching tasks you dislike | 16. Dealing with setbacks |