

OPINION

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The Essential Skills for Being Human



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If you ever saw the old movie “Fiddler on the Roof,” you know how warm and emotional Jewish families can be. They are always hugging, singing, dancing, laughing and crying together.

I come from another kind of Jewish family.

The culture of my upbringing could be summed up by the phrase “Think Yiddish, act British.” We were reserved, stiff-upper-lip types. I’m not saying I had a bad childhood; far from it. Home was a stimulating place for me growing up. At Thanksgiving, we talked about the history of Victorian funerary monuments and the evolutionary sources of lactose intolerance (I’m not kidding). There was love in our home. We just didn’t express it.

Whether it was nature or nurture, I grew into a person who was a bit detached. When I was 4, my nursery schoolteacher apparently told my parents, “David doesn’t always play with the other children. A lot of the time he stands off to the side and *observes* them,” which was good for a career in journalism but not for emotional availability or a joyous life.

If you had met me 10 years out of college, I think you would have found me a pleasant enough guy, cheerful, but a tad inhibited — somebody who was not easy to connect to. In truth, I was a practiced escape artist. If you revealed some

vulnerable intimacy to me, I was good at making meaningful eye contact with your shoes and then excusing myself to keep a vitally important appointment with my dry cleaner.

Life has a way of tenderizing you, though. Becoming a father was an emotional revolution, of course. Later, I absorbed my share of the normal blows that any adult suffers — broken relationships, personal failures, the vulnerability that comes with getting older. The ensuing sense of my own frailty was good for me, introducing me to deeper, repressed parts of myself. I learned that living in a detached way is a withdrawal from life, an estrangement not just from other people but also from yourself.

I'm not an exceptional person, but I am a grower. I do have the ability to look at my shortcomings and then try to prod myself into becoming a more fully developed person.

I have learned something profound along the way. Being openhearted is a prerequisite for being a full, kind and wise human being. But it is not enough. People need social skills. The real process of, say, building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete actions well: being curious about other people; disagreeing without poisoning relationships; revealing vulnerability at an appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another's point of view.

People want to connect. Above almost any other need, human beings long to have another person look into their faces with love and acceptance. The issue is that we lack practical knowledge about how to give one another the attention we crave. Some days it seems like we have intentionally built a society that gives people little guidance on how to perform the most important activities of life.

I see the results in the social clumsiness I encounter too frequently. I'll be leaving a party or some gathering and I'll realize: That whole time, nobody asked me a single question. I estimate that only 30 percent of the people in the world are good

question askers. The rest are nice people, but they just don't ask. I think it's because they haven't been taught to and so don't display basic curiosity about others.

I see the results, too, in the epidemic of invisibility I encounter as a journalist. I often find myself interviewing people who tell me they feel unseen and disrespected: Black people feeling that the systemic inequities that afflict their daily experiences are not understood by whites, people who live in rural areas feeling they are overlooked by coastal elites, people across political divides staring at one another with angry incomprehension, depressed young people who feel misunderstood by their parents and everyone else, husbands and wives who realize that the person who should know them best actually has no clue about who they are.

So over the past four years I've been working on a book called "How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen." I wanted it to be a practical book — so that I would learn these skills myself, and also, I hope, teach people how to understand others, how to make them feel respected, valued and understood.

I wanted to learn these skills for utilitarian reasons. If I'm going to work with someone, I don't just want to see his superficial technical abilities. I want to understand him more deeply — to know whether he is calm in a crisis, comfortable with uncertainty or generous to colleagues.

I wanted to learn these skills for moral reasons. If I can shine positive attention on others, I can help them to blossom. If I see potential in others, they may come to see potential in themselves. True understanding is one of the most generous gifts any of us can give to another.

Finally, I wanted to learn these skills for reasons of national survival. We evolved to live with small bands of people like ourselves. Now we live in wonderfully diverse societies, but our social skills are inadequate for the divisions that exist. We live in a brutalizing time.

I've noticed along the way that some people are much better at seeing people than others are. In any collection of humans, there are diminishers and there are illuminators. Diminishers are so into themselves, they make others feel insignificant. They stereotype and label. If they learn one thing about you, they proceed to make a series of assumptions about who you must be.

Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know how to ask the right questions at the right times — so that they can see things, at least a bit, from another's point of view. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, respected, lit up.

Illuminators are a joy to be around. A biographer of the novelist E.M. Forster wrote, "To speak with him was to be seduced by an inverse charisma, a sense of being listened to with such intensity that you had to be your most honest, sharpest, and best self." Imagine how good it would be to offer people that kind of hospitality.

Many years ago, patent lawyers at Bell Labs were trying to figure out why some employees were much more productive than others. They explored almost every possible explanation — educational background, position in the company — and came up empty. Then they noticed a quirk. Many of the most productive researchers were in the habit of having breakfast or lunch with an electrical engineer named Harry Nyquist. Nyquist really listened to their challenges, got inside their heads, brought out the best in them. Nyquist, too, was an illuminator.

Here are some of the skills illuminators possess, the ones that are essential for seeing people well:

The gift of attention.

A few years ago, I was having a breakfast meeting in a diner in Waco, Texas, with a stern, imposing former teacher named LaRue Dorsey. I wanted to understand her efforts as a community builder because of my work with Weave, an organization I co-founded that addresses social isolation by supporting those who connect people.

I was struck by her toughness, and I was a bit intimidated. Then a mutual friend named Jimmy Dorrell came into the diner, rushed up to our table, grabbed Mrs. Dorsey by the shoulders and beamed: “Mrs. Dorsey, you’re the best! You’re the best! I love you! I love you!”

I’ve never seen a person’s whole aspect transform so suddenly. The disciplinarian face Mrs. Dorsey had put on under my gaze vanished, and a joyous, delighted 9-year-old girl appeared. That’s the power of attention.

Each of us has a characteristic way of showing up in the world. A person who radiates warmth will bring out the glowing sides of the people he meets, while a person who conveys formality can meet the same people and find them stiff and detached. “Attention,” the psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist writes, “is a moral act: It creates, brings aspects of things into being.”

The first point of my story is that you should attend to people in the warm way Jimmy does and less in the reserved way that I used to do. But my deeper point is that Jimmy is a pastor. When Jimmy sees a person — any person — he is seeing a creature with infinite value and dignity, made in the image of God. He is seeing someone so important that Jesus was willing to die for that person.

You may be an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew or something else, but casting this kind of reverential attention is an absolute precondition for seeing people well. When you offer a gaze that communicates respect, you are positively answering the questions people are unconsciously asking themselves when they meet you: “Am I a person to you? Am I a priority to you?” Those questions are answered by your eyes before they are answered by your words. Jimmy is a classic illuminator.

Accompaniment.

Ninety percent of waking life is going about your business. It’s a meeting at work, small talk while picking up your kids at school. Accompaniment is an other-centered way of being with people during the normal routines of life. We’re most

familiar with the concept of accompaniment in music: The pianist accompanies the singer. He is in a supportive role, sensing where the singer is going, subtly working to help the singer shine.

If we are going to accompany someone well, we need to abandon the efficiency mind-set. We need to take our time and simply delight in another person's way of being. I know a couple who treasure friends who are what they call "lingerable." These are the sorts of people who are just great company, who turn conversation into a form of play and encourage you to be yourself. It's a great talent, to be lingerable.

Other times, a good accompanist does nothing more than practice the art of presence, just being there. I had a student named Gillian Sawyer whose father died of pancreatic cancer. She was later the bridesmaid at a friend's wedding. When it came time for the father-daughter dance, Gillian thought of her own dad and excused herself to go to the restroom to have a cry. As she emerged, she saw that all the people she'd been sitting near, many of whom were friends from college, were standing in the hallway by the bathroom door. She gave me permission to quote from a paper she wrote describing that moment: "What I will remember forever is that no one said a word. Each person, including newer boyfriends who I knew less well, gave me a reaffirming hug and headed back to their table. No one lingered or awkwardly tried to validate my grief. They were there for me, just for a moment, and it was exactly what I needed."

The art of conversation.

If you want to know how the people around you see the world, you have to ask them. Here are a few tips I've collected from experts on how to become a better conversationalist:

Be a loud listener. When another person is talking, you want to be listening so actively you're burning calories. I have a friend named Andy Crouch who listens as if he were a congregant in a charismatic church. He's continually responding to my

comments with encouraging affirmations, with “amen,” “aha” and “yes!” I love talking to that guy.

Storify whenever possible. I no longer ask people: What do you think about that? Instead, I ask: How did you come to believe that? That gets them talking about the people and experiences that shaped their values. People are much more revealing and personal when they are telling stories. And the conversation is going to be warmer and more fun.

Do the looping, especially with adolescents. People are not as clear as they think they are, and we’re not as good at listening as we think we are. If you tell me something important and then I paraphrase it back to you, what psychologists call “looping,” we can correct any misimpressions that may exist between us.

Turn your partner into a narrator. People don’t go into enough detail when they tell you a story. If you ask specific follow-up questions — Was your boss screaming or irritated when she said that to you? What was her tone of voice? — then they will revisit the moment in a more concrete way and tell a richer story.

Don’t be a topper. If somebody tells you he is having trouble with his teenager, don’t turn around and say: “I know exactly what you mean. I’m having incredible problems with my own Susan.” You may think you’re trying to build a shared connection, but what you are really doing is shifting attention back to yourself.

Big questions.

The quality of your conversations will depend on the quality of your questions. Kids are phenomenal at asking big, direct questions. I have a friend named Niobe Way who was one day teaching a class of eighth grade boys how to conduct interviews. She made herself their first interview subject and told them they could ask her anything. Here’s how it went:

Student A: Are you married?

Niobe Way: No.

Student B: Are you divorced?

Way: Yes.

Student C: Do you still love him?

Way: [*Deep gasp of breath*]

Student D: Does he know that you still love him? Does he know?

Way: [*Tears in her eyes*]

Student E: Do your children know?

As adults, we get more inhibited with our questions, if we even ask them at all. I've learned we're generally too cautious. People are dying to tell you their stories. Very often, no one has ever asked about them.

So when I first meet people, I tend to ask them where they grew up. People are at their best when talking about their childhoods. Or I ask where they got their names. That gets them talking about their families and ethnic backgrounds. I once asked a group, "What's your favorite unimportant thing about you?" I learned that a very impressive academic I know has a fixation on trashy reality TV.

After you've established trust with a person, it's great to ask 30,000-foot questions, ones that lift people out of their daily vantage points and help them see themselves from above. These are questions like: What crossroads are you at? Most people are in the middle of some life transition; this question encourages them to step back and describe theirs. Other good questions include: If the next five years is a chapter in your life, what is the chapter about? Can you be yourself where you are and still fit in? And: What would you do if you weren't afraid? Or: If you died today, what would you regret not doing?

Peter Block, who has written books about community, is great at coming up with questions: "What have you said yes to that you no longer really believe in?" "What is the no, or refusal, you keep postponing?" Or "What is the gift you currently hold in exile?" meaning, what talent are you not using? Monica Guzman is a journalist who asks people: "Why you?" Why was it *you* who started that business? Why was it *you* who ran for school board? She wants to understand why a person felt the call of responsibility. She wants to understand motivation.

Recently at a dinner party I asked a question that would have sounded pretentious to me a decade ago: “How do your ancestors show up in your life?” But it led to a great conversation in which each of us talked about how we’d been formed by our family heritages and cultures. I’ve come to think of questioning as a moral practice. When you’re asking good questions, you’re adopting a posture of humility, and you’re honoring the other person.

Stand in their standpoint.

Whether I intend to or not, I walk into rooms carrying a lot of elite baggage — I write for elite publications. I used to teach at Yale. People on the left and the right may see me embedded in systems that they feel disrespect them or keep them down. There is often criticism, blame and disagreement in our conversations. I used to feel the temptation to get defensive, to say: “You don’t know everything I’m dealing with. You don’t know that I’m one of the good guys here.”

I’ve learned it’s best to resist this temptation. My first job in any conversation across difference or inequality is to stand in other people’s standpoint and fully understand how the world looks to them. I’ve found it’s best to ask other people three separate times and in three different ways about what they have just said. “I want to understand as much as possible. What am I missing here?”

In their book “Crucial Conversations,” Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler point out that every conversation takes place on two levels. The official conversation is represented by the words we are saying on whatever topic we are talking about. The actual conversations occur amid the ebb and flow of emotions that get transmitted as we talk. With every comment I am showing you respect or disrespect, making you feel a little safer or a little more threatened.

If we let fear and a sense of threat build our conversation, then very quickly our motivations will deteriorate. We won’t talk to understand but to pummel. Everything we say afterward will be injurious and hurtful and will make repairing the relationship in the future harder. If, on the other hand, I show persistent

curiosity about your viewpoint, I show respect. And as the authors of “Crucial Conversations” observe, in any conversation, respect is like air. When it’s present nobody notices it, and when it’s absent it’s all anybody can think about.

We sometimes think that really great people perform the sorts of epic acts of altruism that might earn them Nobel Peace Prizes. But the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch argued that the essential moral skill is being considerate to others in the complex circumstances of everyday life. Morality is about how we interact with each other minute by minute.

My view of wisdom has changed over the years I’ve been working on this project. I used to think the wise person was a lofty sage who doled out life-altering advice in the manner of Yoda or Dumbledore or Solomon. But now I think the wise person’s essential gift is tender receptivity.

The illuminators offer the privilege of witness. They take the anecdotes, rationalizations and episodes we tell and see us in a noble struggle. They see the way we’re navigating the dialectics of life — intimacy versus independence, control versus freedom — and understand that our current selves are just where we are right now on our long continuum of growth.

The really good confidants — the people we go to when we are troubled — are more like coaches than philosopher kings. They take in your story, accept it, but prod you to clarify what it is you really want, or to name the baggage you left out of your clean tale. They’re not here to fix you; they are here simply to help you edit your story so that it’s more honest and accurate. They’re here to call you by name, as beloved. They see who you are becoming before you do and provide you with a reputation you can then go live into.

By now you’d think I’d be a regular Oprah, enveloping people in a warm beam of attention, encouraging them to be themselves. I’m not, and I don’t. I enter into a conversation vowing to be other-centered, then I have a glass of wine, and I start blabbing funny stories I know. My ego takes the wheel in ways I regret afterward. But there has been a comprehensive shift in my posture. I think I’m more

approachable, vulnerable. I know more about human psychology than I used to. I have a long way to go, but I'm evidence that people can change, sometimes dramatically, even in middle and older age.

I'll close with a final example of one group of people profoundly seeing one another. I came across it in Kathryn Schulz's recent memoir, "Lost & Found." Schulz's dad, Isaac, was apparently a cheerful, talkative man. He was curious about everything and had something to say about everything — the novels of Edith Wharton, the infield fly rule in baseball, whether apple cobblers are better than apple crisps.

Isaac's health gradually failed him during the last decade of his life, and then, toward the very end, he just stopped talking. One night, as he was fading toward death, his family gathered around him. "I had always regarded my family as close, so it was startling to realize how much closer we could get, how near we drew around his waning flame," Schulz writes. That evening, the members of the family went around the room and took turns saying the things they didn't want to leave unsaid. They each told Isaac what he had given to them and how honorably he had lived his life.

Schulz described the scene: "My father, mute but seemingly alert, looked from one face to the next as we spoke, his brown eyes shining with tears. I had always hated to see him cry, and seldom did, but for once, I was grateful. It gave me hope that, for what may have been the last time in his life, and perhaps the most important, he understood. If nothing else, I knew that everywhere he looked that evening, he found himself where he had always been with his family: the center of the circle, the source and subject of our abiding love."

That was a guy who was truly seen.

This essay was adapted from the forthcoming book "How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen."

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