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The Secret of Flourishing

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Train

“I’m going to give you five words to remember,” the nurse said. “You can remember them any way you want, like *train*, Choo! Choo! or *baby*, Wah! Wah! I’ll ask you to repeat them after you finish your paperwork and we do some other tests. Ready?”

She said five words. Four nouns, one adjective. No context, no connection, no story. Just a set of random objects and the name of a color, all floating in a sea of unreality. I didn’t want to drown, so I hung on to those words while I completed the questionnaire printed in letters so small they looked like squashed gnats. Do you smoke? No—well...a few Kools, the occasional joint—fifty years ago. How often do you drink alcohol? *One to two times a week*—more when I feel like jumping out of my skin, like now. Do you need help with everyday activities? *No*—and I don’t need anyone’s help to remember *train* or *baby*. Please don’t infantilize me. Have you fallen recently? *No*—Wait! Just now, walking along, minding my own business, I fell into your camouflaged trap and now I’m at the bottom of a pit, pacing, building up enough power to leap at the walls and keep jumping until I can claw my way out. How do I get out of here? How often are you anxious?

Depressed? *Never*—unless feeling as desperate as I do right now counts, now that I’m hyperalert to your game: you the hunter, stalking me, watching for signs of weakness, waiting to catch me in a vulnerable position; me the prey. I am at your mercy. Why spring this on people? Like a mugger jumping out at you from a darkened doorway, jamming a gun in your ribs, and yelling “Give me your wallet!”

Blood pressure rises in a doctor’s office. Nerves. So does scattered thinking. Nerves again. Is that why I’m losing my train of thought? On my way to panicking? What if I don’t pass?

Train-chair-hat-blue-egg.

Egg

“Draw a clock face with the time forty minutes to eleven,” she instructed, handing me a blank sheet of paper.

“A.m. or p.m?”

Wariness flickered across The Hunter’s face. I could see her calculating: Just how diseased is this woman’s mind? Already sundowning?

“Kidding!” I said, smiling. Humor’s a sign of intelligence, isn’t it? I read somewhere that people who appreciate humor about distressing topics like death and disease may have higher IQs, be less aggressive, and are better able to resist negative feelings, like anger or fear.

She didn’t smile back.

“Finished!” I said, handing over my clock. “That’ll be a lost art soon. How many digi-drunk millennials can draw an analog clock?”

“I’m not a millennial,” she said, adding my drawing to her pile of notes.

I decided I’d better walk on eggshells with her.

Train-blue-hat-egg-chair? What mnemonic to use? I’m hopeless at visualizing. Acronyms? Boring. Rhymes? I’m no poet. Chunking? The word itself is ugly. Where would I place these five things in my refrigerator? Absurd. A riff on my favorite Sesame Street song? “Four of these things belong together/One of these things just isn’t the same”?

Blue-hat-train-egg-chair.

Chair

“Name as many animals as you can before the timer runs out.”

“Mammals? Fish? Birds? Reptiles? Insects?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Do *we* count?” I wanted to ask. *We’re* animals. The philosopher Mary Midgley argued that point decades ago in *Beast and Man* (1980). “Human beings and other animals” (p. xiii), she writes, to remind us we’re not the qualitatively distinct creatures the Western tradition has claimed we are for millennia. No one trait or ability sets us apart, not reason or will, memory or cooperation, use of symbols or tools, feelings of empathy or grief. We’re just a more complex organization of the capabilities we share with all living organisms, from bacteria on up.

The latest science backs Midgley up. What distinguishes us from other animals is our morphology, our upright posture and our hand—specifically our hand’s emptiness and its long opposable

thumb, ready to grasp, manipulate, make. That unique combination expands the possibilities for interacting with our environment, hence increasing our ability to make conscious, intentional, intelligent choices. *We know, we think* with our distinctive *human* body. That's why we're *homo sapiens*, which doesn't mean rational or intelligent, but *wise*. Like other animals, we're intelligent, always selecting what to attend to in our world and how to respond so life flourishes. We're named "wise" because our marvel of a body opens up seemingly infinite possibilities for responding to our environment—laughter among them.

Given my current environment, I decided it was wise to keep my mouth shut about what it means to be a human animal, lest The Hunter decide I was "confused" or unable to sort things into their "proper" categories. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to say to her, *Yes, I'm old, diminishing daily, and you are young, fully empowered. That doesn't mean you can assess and dispatch me as if I'm a specimen. I'm a human being, like you. Look at me! Laugh with me! Being human is so precious and so fleeting.*

"Ready? Go!"

"Wolves, coyotes, bobcats, wolverines, alligators, crocodiles, rattlers, cottonmouths, copperheads, cobras, orcas, sharks, barracudas, hawks, vultures, falcons, hornets, yellowjackets, fire ants, tarantulas, Tasmanian devils, warthogs, wildebeests, cheetahs, jackals, hyenas—"

Ding! The Hunter leaned forward in her chair. "Okay, what are the five words?"

My stomach soured, my hands trembled. Fever flooded my face, neck, chest. “Train, chair, blue, hat ... *what?* ... egg.” Relief washed over me, the trap evaded. “Wait! Do you need them in the original order?”

Shaking her head and scooping up her notes, she said, “Back in a few minutes.”

EGG! Egg-train-hat-chair-blue.

Blue

Alone, I paced, from wall to door and back. Terror wouldn't release me from its grip. Why hadn't she said anything? I had passed, hadn't I? I wasn't expecting a blue ribbon, but not a word? Nothing? To calm myself, I arranged and rearranged the words. When I hit *train-egg-chair-blue-hat*, I saw the letters t, e, c, and a blue hat, and my body smiled. A toe-tapping techie sporting a blue hat! Who could forget such an amusing scene? Unless... I didn't need Antonio Damasio (2018) or any neuroscientist to tell me Alzheimer's disease disrupts the formation and access to long-term memory of integrated scenes. I'd seen the evidence close to home. My dad's mom, my dad. “If I ever show signs of Alzheimer's,” my sister used to joke, “plunk me on an ice floe in Antarctica and let me drift away to die.”

I redoubled my efforts, calling up the techie-in-a-blue-hat scene each time I listed the words. I repeated it so often I feared I'd lose the individual words in the flow of the rhythm.

The Hunter was gone 19 minutes. I timed her with my phone's stopwatch. When she reappeared,

I blurted, “Train-egg-chair-blue-hat! Those words are seared into my brain forever.”

She grabbed something off her desk and left.

The doctor entered, checked my heart, lungs, ears, reflexes, skin. Pronounced me healthy and fit. We chatted briefly, about Persian food, women’s ways of body-knowing that doctors often dismiss, mores and modesty, here and in Iran. Before the exam, we’d shared a laugh. When she asked me to undress and I peeled off my shirt, she stood facing me, instead of leaving the room to protect my dignity, the way American doctors are taught to do. “Oh,” she said, covering an embarrassed giggle with her hand and turning her back to me for impromptu privacy. I laughed with her. “I’m not modest,” I reassured her, hastening to add, “I mean I’m modest, but not ashamed of my body. And you’re a *doctor*. What’s to be afraid of?” When she turned to face me, she was still smiling. I liked her. She was fun. Her braces twinkled in the fluorescent lights.

“See you next year!” she said on her way out.

Train-egg-chair-blue-hat all the way home. Heart pounding, stomach knotting, mind racing. *Train-egg-chair-blue-hat* every night before bed, every morning waking up, cooking dinner, showering, planking, walking to the store. *Train-egg-chair-blue-hat*. Like a mantra to calm the monkey-mind or a spell to ward off evil. Like a singsong chant a woman repeats to herself when scenes flash across her brain: her grandmother smiling vacantly as she unravels her knitting, cooing to a plastic baby doll; her dad, lost in his own house, walking naked down the street, speaking

in numbers because he's lost all words but *Our Father, help me, I want to die.*

Train-egg-chair-blue-hat. I am not at their mercy. Train-egg-chair-blue-hat. I am not in danger. Train-egg-chair-blue-hat. I am safe. I am safe. I am safe.

Hat

I delayed my next annual visit by months, too scared to face the tests. "Study," an older friend suggested. "Everybody I know practices before they go in. Drawing clock faces, listing animals, trying out memory tricks." I wanted to be sanguine, like them, to treat it as old hat, a silly game. But I was too spooked. My amygdalae were screaming, "Run!"

When another friend, a nurse, suggested I didn't have to take the test, I made an appointment. I counted the days until I had to go, crippled by dread. What if they didn't accept my refusal? What if I didn't pass?

Train-egg-chair-blue-hat all the way to the doctor's office.

As the nurse weighed me, she asked, "Do you want me to convert the kilos to pounds?"

"It's 130 pounds and a couple of ounces."

"Exactly!"

After the blood pressure and general intake questions, she reached for a file stashed on the wall. "Just the cognitive test left."

Nausea. I pressed the reflexology spot between my left thumb and index finger for relief. "I want to skip that. I'm still traumatized from last year's

test.” I laughed to show her I was not a “difficult patient” but a “nice person,” a person she wouldn’t mind doing a favor for, like overlooking an item on her mandatory checklist. This is what aging had come to: bowing and scraping, the way the powerless do, to signal, *I’ll behave, please don’t hurt me.*

She shrugged. “I’ll note *patient declined.*”

When she left, I had a new worry. Would my name go on some government list marked as “noncompliant?” Would they take away my Medicare? If I didn’t take the test this year, would I fail it the next? Chronic stress leads to memory loss. Was I already declining? In denial?

After the doctor completed the physical exam and we talked about women here and in Iran, the classes I was teaching, and the book I was writing, I told her about my year of torment since the last visit—the constant search for holes in my mind. “Now I’ve got an anxiety disorder,” I joked. “I’m turning into an obsessive compulsive, choking on a chain of words.”

She looked concerned. “You always have a choice,” she said. “I’m sorry we gave you the impression you didn’t.”

You always have a choice. *That’s* what I’d forgotten.

Cells hold the secret

You always have a choice. Hearing those words from my internist set me free from terror. Paralyzed by fear, I had been acting as if I were a strict or “hard” determinist like B.F. Skinner, believing I

was absolutely dependent on systems and circumstances beyond my control, both biological and social; that intention, purpose, genuine choice did not exist, for our existence was beyond freedom and dignity. I had forgotten I was *also* free. The philosophy and science I'd been reading confirmed that freedom, although until my doctor's frank words, I hadn't taken that research to heart. Antonio Damasio's *The Strange Order of Things*, for example, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* explain that even individual cells are not absolutely determined: they have a kind of freedom, an agency that enables them to thrive. They select, then accept or refuse elements in their environment—without intention, without consciousness, but with *intelligence*, from the Latin *legere*, to read, to pick out, to choose. Amoebas, for example, sort food from nonfood, decide what to move toward and away from.

Now I understood what I had to do. My *cells* knew the secret of flourishing: *they* never forgot to select and respond. I needed to remember I, too, was free. I had to fully inhabit being *sapiens*, to relish the power of my embodied mind to navigate freedom within limits, to sort what's life-giving from what's life-denying—consciously as well as unconsciously. I needed to choose how to respond to the possibility of my body-mind developing the same disease my grandmother and father had suffered from.

Though freedom is a given for all living beings, it is never absolute. “The mind is inherently embodied,” as Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue, and “[t]hought is mostly unconscious,” which means

“[s]ince reason is shaped by our body, it’s not radically free.” (p. 3) All living beings are free-yet-*determined*. “For example, every living being categorizes ... The amoeba cannot choose whether to categorize: it just does. The same is true at every level of the animal world” (p. 17). We humans are always sorting, whether we realize it or not. Food, not food. Pleasure, disgust. Friend, enemy. Run, resist. Terror, laughter.

We also cannot choose not to be dependent on our environment, our circumstances, or other beings. All beings are “being-with, a being-in-relation,” argues the philosopher Albert Memmi in *Dependence* (1984), which means “[n]o thing or person is ever completely or permanently safe” (p. 47). What makes old age tragic is that the elderly “suffer most of all from the progressive loss of their ties to other people ... What is a personality, a human character, but those complex webs that individuals weave around themselves and that bring meaning, joys, and sorrows into their lives? Without them, life is all silence, immobility, and neglect, and before long individuals start to fall apart, like abandoned factories, and resign themselves to death” (Memmi, 1984, pp. 152–153).

Here’s another choice no living creature has—from prokaryotes like bacteria cells to eukaryote cells to the multicellular organisms called *metazoans* to creatures with complex nervous systems to beings with mental experiences of feeling and consciousness, beings like us, with minds made up of images, minds with “their secret for narrative or storytelling” (Damasio, 2018, p. 92): we cannot choose not to die.

We are determined, yes. And we are free. Free to respond in life-giving ways to our biology, our circumstances, other people, our social and political systems. I can't choose whether I carry any of the genes linked to the risk of Alzheimer's. I can't choose whether they will activate in my body-mind and isolate me from those I love, turn me, despite all my efforts, into an abandoned factory—or not. I can't determine whether I'll live long enough for scientists to find a way to prevent, slow, or reverse the disease. I can choose how to respond to that possibility, now and every moment. I can choose not to run away in terror, but to turn to face it. I can choose to exercise my body and mind, and to follow the MIND Diet and other scientific recommendations, in the hope they may lessen my chances of developing the disease.

I can choose to live, every day, every moment, not in fear but in love—nurturing relationships, deepening love, giving thanks for life, sharing laughter as well as sorrows. I can choose to be amused by the world, its inevitabilities and accidents, mishaps and absurdities; laugh in playfulness; laugh lovingly at the foibles we share, the choices we make, the illusions we comfort ourselves with, and the ways we unnecessarily limit our lives. Laughter may not be unique to human beings—at least 65 different animal species laugh—but being able to respond with laughter, even in the face of disease and death, is one of the gifts of our existence. We are free to laugh. Rumi reminds us of this oft-forgotten freedom when he writes, “What is hidden in our chests? Laughter” (Barks, 1997, p. 92).

Here are the questions I now ask myself every day and that I would be happy to answer on the medical intake form at my next annual wellness visit. What life-affirming choices have you made lately? How often do you laugh? Because when my doctor asks, “How have you been?” I plan to respond, “I’m flourishing.”

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