

“I Don’t Have to Think!” versus the Art of Reflective Practice

Joseph A. Raelin

Notes:

1. Reflective Practice: the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment.
(thinking about our thinking)

2. What does reflective practice do?: It illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for future action.

- instead of thinking creatively about problems we directly jump to conclusions or solutions that we have used in the past. If we are able to think about the way or the process in which we think, we will be able to reflect on these processes.
- reflective practice is more than valuing private evaluation of our thoughts. It includes opening our thoughts up to the reflection of others.
- many times we reflect after the moment has passed. To challenge ourselves we need to reflect “in the heat of the moment” in order to be affective in this process.

3. Why do we reflect?

- we reflect because we are often “unaware of our behavior and its consequences.” This unawareness does not allow us to use new information about or way of thinking which would allow us to learn from our actions.
- many times we are biased in the way we receive and interpret pieces of information.
- when trying to solve problems, we tend to look for “similarities between the [past] situations rather than differences. This prevents new and improved ways of critical thinking that would benefit the problem solving process.

4. Descriptions of the Reflective Practice (see the boxes in grey pg. 70-71 of the handout)

5. Developing the discipline of folding action and reflection together into one process can be learned if you :

- Commit to the process
- Have no goals
- Balance affirmation and investigation
- Pause, reflect, contemplate
- Free up roles (no hierarchy)
- Seek out assumptions
- Observe judgments
- Share parallel thinking

6. Five (5) skills for reflective practice:

- Being: “staying with oneself or taking action toward others.”
- Speaking: “to articulate a collective voice from within our selves. Attempting to characterize the state of the group or its meaning at a given time.”
- Disclosing: “staying within oneself and at the same time, sharing doubts and voicing individual passion.”
- Testing: “an open-ended inquiry directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving.”
- Probing: “making a direct inquiry to find out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action.”

"I Don't Have Time to Think!" versus the Art of Reflective Practice

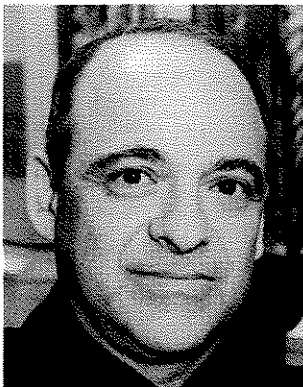
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"Susan, you're next. As you know, we figure the Cadlink merger is going ahead. They expect their Wentworth localization unit to be merged with your marketing group. What do you think?"

"No problem, Charlie," Susan replied. "We can integrate them, no sweat."

"Wait a second," Charlie said, looking a little uneasy. "I heard they use an entirely different CRM model. Don't you want to think about this a little?"

"Charlie," Susan insisted. "I'm working on a news release on the merger. I don't have time to think!"



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Managers like Susan and Charlie live in a world of frenetic activity. Reflective practice is hardly possible or practical in this age of the busy corporate executive who is socialized to be a person of action, not of reflection. Action is required. Delaying decisions is seen as a sign of weakness, even if the delay may subsequently produce a better decision. CEOs want an answer rather than a question; they are looking for solutions rather than problems. Yet, is it possible that the frenetic activity of the executive is a drug for the emptiness of our organizational souls, that constant action may merely serve as a substitute for thought?

So society gives reflection and its counterpart—listening—short shrift. We don't seem to be interested in the whole story. We even perfect the art of interruption so that we can show our "proactivity" and gain the boss's attention. There was a time before instant replay when humans had to get the whole message or it would be lost forever. We seem to be unwilling to perfect the art of public reflection, in which we show a willingness to inquire about our own and our colleague's assumptions and meanings.

What Is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice, as I define it in this article, is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment. It illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for future action. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice. In its public form, it is associated with learning dialogues. These types of discussions, rather than constituting an exchange of statements of viewpoints, bring to the surface—in the safe presence of trusting peers—the social, political, and emotional data that arise from direct experience with one another. Often these data are precisely those that might be blocking operating effectiveness. Learning dialogues also are concerned with creating mutual caring relationships.

Reflective practice tends to probe to a deeper level than trial-and-error experience. It typically is concerned with forms of learning that seek to inquire about the most fundamental assumptions and premises behind our practices. It is thinking about our thinking. Consider that the brain, as a sophisticated information-processing organ, can handle some

50,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. Unfortunately, as we encounter problems in our work, we tend to go no further than consulting our “solution database” (depicted in figure 1) to find an answer.¹ Our solution database contains all the standard answers and assumptions we have used in our past to solve our problems.

In thinking about thinking, we are actually able to reflect together about our solution databases and add to them or alter them entirely. In this way, we reflect together with trusted others in the midst of practice. Plato had relationships in mind when, in *Apology*, he quoted Socrates’s now famous phrase: “The unexamined life isn’t worth living.” This phrase has often been misinterpreted as a call for additional introspection. Although this might be useful, the actual meaning is that we need to include others in the examination of experience in our life. Plato’s idea resonated with Aristotle, who recognized that human beings are social animals whose good is bound up with the good of the *polis*. Underpinned by these Greek roots, the egalitarian tradition in Western thought has long since recognized that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others.

So, reflective practice, though recognizing the value of private reflection, opens up for public scrutiny our interpretations and evaluations of our plans and actions. We subject our assumptions, be they personal or professional, to the review of others. We do this not only before or after an event, but learn to inquire even in the heat of the moment.

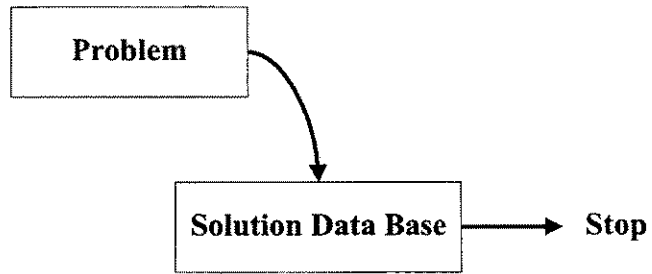


Figure 1 Our normal problem-solving pattern

Rationale for Reflective Practice

Reflection must be brought out in the open for many reasons:

1. At times, we are, unfortunately, unaware of our behavior and its consequences. To complicate matters, our unawareness occasionally does not allow us to be open to new data or information that would help us learn from our actions. We may even be unaware that the questions we ask might be producing defensiveness in others, closing off the possibility of generating new information, even new questions. Often, only through the support of and feedback from others in an open dialogue can we become receptive to alternate ways of reasoning and behaving.

For example, Claire, a research director at a pharmaceutical firm, had advanced to her position after being mentored by the foremost biochemistry guru in the company. His approach was to try to poke holes in every proposal on which Claire had been working. Now in management, she saw her role as “grilling” her subordinates, not only privately but in public during and after their research briefings. She was surprised when three of her subordinates requested a transfer out of her group, claiming that she was too much of a perfectionist to work with. Why couldn’t they understand that she was just trying to be helpful and that her interrogation at the end of the day always led to a better project?

2. There is an unfortunate gap between what many of us say we will do and what we actually do. We are simply guilty of deceiving ourselves that we can practice what we preach, though what we preach may be very difficult to accomplish in particular organizational cultures. How many readers have submitted to the game called “Yes, but . . .” with a boss? “Yes, but . . .” bosses typically start out by proclaiming that they have an open-door policy. “If you ever have a problem or a question for me or about our operation, you should feel free to come to me at any time,” they proudly avow. A series of conversations with the boss ensue during the next several months and may go something like this:

[One month later] “Boss, I would like to propose that we adopt the balanced scorecard approach to measuring our outcomes.” “Yes, good idea, but we actually tried it 14 months ago and it didn’t work. But keep those great ideas coming!”

[Two months later] “Boss, rather than paying out so much overtime, what would you say to hiring Tim Evans part-time to help us out. I know he’s available.” “Yes, that might work, but Tim didn’t get along well with Sara, so I think we best continue as we have been.”

[Three months later] “Boss, I know the group can increase its efficiency if we purchase and then receive some training in the software program, PROJ-ACT. I know a great supplier;

they do a great job and can convert us in under two weeks." "Yes, but Marcia proposed that we try out the exact same program, and it was voted down just before you joined us."

[Four months later] "Boss, what would you say to all of us going out to see the latest Spielberg flick?" "Yes, he's great, and his current movie has an important message for our group, but you can't force these social outings on people. We each have our own lives."

[Five months later] No more ideas are forthcoming. Case closed.

3. Most of us are biased in how we obtain information that, in turn, produces cognitive "errors" in our perceptions of reality. Errors constitute such practices as collecting data superficially, ignoring certain pieces of information, making assumptions about data rather than investigating them, or using self-confirming reasoning. However, if we are interested in improving our managerial practices, we have to become aware of these so-called errors. Such an awareness is extremely difficult to awaken without the involvement of peers who can detect the use of untested assumptions and raw biases.

In the game of professional baseball, some managers employ a so-called "platoon" system in which they use certain left-handed players against right-handed pitchers, but replace them for a right-handed batter when the pitcher happens to be left-handed. The reason for platooning is that it is merely easier for batters to face opposite-handed pitchers. However, this general statistical rule breaks down at the level of the specific case, where more reflective practice may be called for. Some batters, for example, do just as well against same-sided as opposite-sided pitchers. Others seem to bat well against particular pitchers, regardless of their throwing arm. Some situations, such as a bunt, may call for a play that may not depend on the hand dominance of the batter.

4. Although intuition and past practices can give us very cogent clues in deciphering future situations, often the new situation presents itself in a different context. Prior solutions may not fit, even if the situations appear alike. We tend to look, however, for the similarities between the situations rather than differences.

This type of normal cognitive processing can play tricks on us. Even when we consult a repertoire of available responses, we may not find one that fits the new situation. Consider the business strategy of mergers and acquisitions (M&As). From most accounts, it appears that more often than not M&As fail to generate the synergistic value expected from the combined entities.

Take the case of Quaker Oats, which has recently merged with Pepsi Co. In 1994, nearly 10 years after the incredibly successful acquisition of Gatorade, Quaker Oats completed a \$1.7 billion merger with Snapple. Three years later, it had to unload Snapple for \$300 million. Given their previous success with Gatorade and their preconceived sense of the cultural norms within the industry, it appears that Quaker's principals may have critically overestimated the more particular cultural differences between the prospective partners. On one hand, Quaker was known for its highly focused, mass-marketing operating style, whereas Snapple was considered to be quirky, entrepreneurial, and distribution oriented. Was it possible that the principals may not have sufficiently reflected on what Robert Thomas (2000) likes to refer to as "cultural due diligence"?

We need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change.

The Practicality of Reflective Practice

Is reflective practice possible or practical in this age of the busy corporate executive who is socialized to be the person of action, not of reflection? In our turbulent global environment, it appears almost definitional that we need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change. A reflective culture makes it possible for people to constantly challenge without fear of retaliation. Yet, a culture that permits questioning of assumptions is difficult to tolerate because it requires that people in control lose their grip on the status quo.

In actuality, inspiring reflective practice in an organization does not have to be an onerous task, even for top managers. Although they are, by definition, people of action, they are also people who, when given a hospitable environment, like to compare expe-

riences and, moreover, to help one another. They may also crave the opportunity to share their insights, questions, and even failures with others, if given a climate receptive to open discourse. Indeed, they might appreciate an opportunity to replay their plans and actions in front of like-minded colleagues who are not assembled to take advantage politically of their faults, but who want to help. They realize that they, too, need the understanding of others.

Accordingly, there are some strategies that organizations might endorse to encourage more widespread use of reflective practice even in the face of unrelenting pressure for action (Haggerty, 2001; Raelin, 2000).

Ω*Reflective actions*—Just one person demonstrating the value of inquiry generates interest in reflection among members of a team or work unit. A team may be introduced to reflective activities and processes such as journals, postmeeting e-mail minutes, reflective note taking, learning histories, and “stop and reflect” or debriefing episodes held during or at the end of meetings (Castleberg, 2001; Kleiner and Roth, 1997).

Ω*Building communities*—Individuals may be encouraged to network with fellow employees who, though not necessarily in the same work unit, may have a shared interest in a craft or job. Other small groups, even dyads, could form for mentoring or support purposes, for sharing and testing ideas, or merely for feedback and exchange on initiatives and performance.

Ω*Process improvement*—Although quality improvement approaches, such as total quality management, may not critically probe to the deeper levels of reflection alluded to earlier, they reinforce the value of learning from experience, whether before, during, or after the practice in question.

Ω*Learning teams*—Whether constituted to support individuals working on their own projects, in the form of work or of self-discovery, or to support task teams working on meaningful action-learning projects, learning teams represent a vehicle to merge theory and practice. Participants, with assistance from their peers and qualified facilitators, use the learning team to help them make sense of their experiences in light of relevant theory. They discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions.

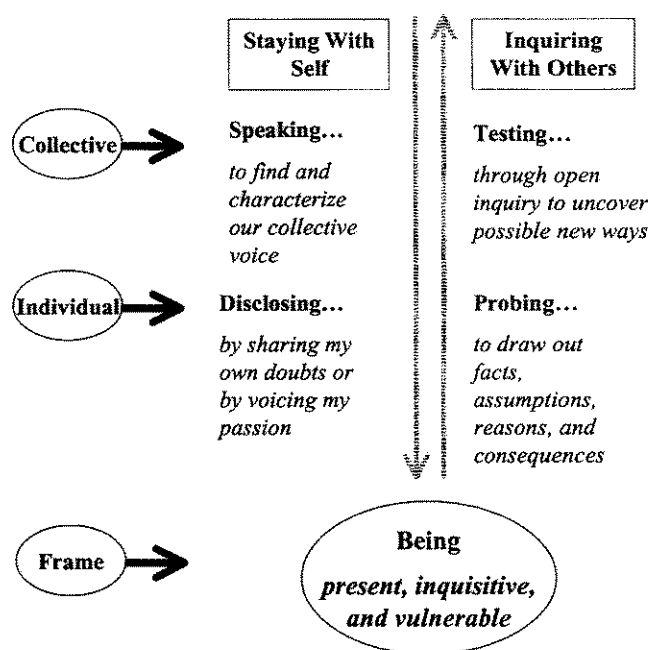
Ω*Culture of learning*—Reflective practice tends to flourish in learning and collaborative environments. Senior managers have a particularly important role in modeling a learning orientation, in particular, a culture that values continuous discovery and experimentation. Reflective practice can become a way of life when organizational members feel free to challenge the governing values of their practice and where structures and standards can change to accommodate new requirements.

The Skills of Reflective Practice

Having considered some organizational strategies to orient firms in the direction of reflective practice, we now drill down to the level of skill to identify specific practices, notwithstanding the basic skills of communication. In particular, beyond the contribution of active listening competencies and the value of feedback, there are five advanced skills that, used together, can contribute to reflective discourse.

Although trained facilitators often introduce these skills, other facilitating members of any work or learning team can also initiate them. The model in figure 2 shows the five principal skills: being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing. They are also displayed in the sidebar, including their definitions, some prompting questions along with associated behaviors, and an example. I examine them here in more detail.

Figure 2 The five skills of reflective practice



Descriptions of the Reflective Skills

Being

Definition

Creates a climate for reflection in the group; asks that we experience or describe situations, even our own involvement in them, without imputing meaning.

Ask

- What can I learn here?
- How am I acting to constrain what is possible?

Behavior

- View with empathy and with open-hearted acceptance.
- View as strange, display deep interest and curiosity.
- Invite questions and comments.
- Acknowledge our own and others' vulnerability.
- Consider positions as hypotheses to be tested.
- Pause, reflect, contemplate.

Example

"It looks like we have pretty much endorsed the direct marketing approach for this advertising campaign. As you know, I have pushed for it as well, but we all remember what happened on the Do-op project. I have to admit that it still feels right to me, but to be honest with you, I still have some reservations. Do you think we should take one more look at this? I'm afraid I might have overlooked something."

Speaking

Definition

Calls for speaking with a collective voice to find collective meaning in the group. It attempts to characterize the state of the group at a given time.

Ask

- What can I say to help the group understand itself?
- What social practices is the group engaging in right now?
- What is emerging in our collective consciousness that I can articulate?

Behavior

- Suggest group norms.
- Articulate meaning, such as by summoning an image.
- Be willing to bring out uncertainties and unfounded assumptions.

Example

"James, your concern left me with an image that seems to characterize our effort right now. It is like we're a cargo plane having to make our destination in Istanbul, but with one engine knocked out."

Disclosing

Definition

Asks that members find and speak with their own voice in order to disclose their own doubts and assumptions and to voice their impatience and passion.

The skill of *being* is central and pervasive, cutting across the other skills, because it represents our presence and vulnerability in creating a reflective climate. Recalling that reflection represents a stepping back to ponder meaning, the first reflective skill is to experience or, even more simply, to be. In accomplishing *being*, we try to experience and describe situations, even our own involvement in them, without imputing meaning to them or without evaluating them. We learn to explain with others.

As the most unusual yet potentially powerful of the skills, the skill of being can place us in a vulnerable state because we do not rely on defending ourselves against experience. The object is rather on opening up to experience and to our interpersonal environment. We engage in such practices as suspending certainty, externalizing our thoughts, and exploring the tension of the opposites. This produces a reflective response that can be characterized by a number of attributes (from Bell, 1998) that directly contrast to the defensive posture:

- ∞ Instead of maintaining unrealistic standards, we set realistic expectations.
- ∞ Instead of expressing trepidation, we display tolerance.
- ∞ Instead of concentrating on self-expression, we listen.

Ask

What am I holding back that needs to be aired?
What might I say to help the group know me better?

Behavior

Disclose feelings at a given moment, based on what has transpired.
Present a story to reveal the depth of experience.

Example

"I wasn't planning on telling you about this. I know I have seemed distracted lately, and the way I just dealt with Linda is a case in point. Well, frankly, I am having some marital problems. I've moved into an apartment and can't get my mind off my kids."

Testing

Definition

Makes an open-ended query to the group to attempt to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. It asks the group to consider its own process, including its norms, roles, and past actions.

Ask

Are we helping each other right now?
What can I ask to help us all focus on our process?

Behavior

Attempt to make a "meta-inquiry," to focus on where the group is right now.
Ask if the group would be willing to test some taken-for-granted assumptions.

Example

"I guess we're at an impasse. In fact, it looks like we're split right down the middle on this one. Can we come up with some way to resolve this to everyone's reasonable satisfaction? What do you all think?"

Probing

Definition

Inquires directly with a group member in order to understand the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. Commits to a nonjudgmental consideration of another's views.

Ask

What is the basis for another's point of view and feelings?
Can I explore with others even though their position may be different from my own?

Behavior

Ask about impressions and perceptions.
Inquire about attributions of others' behavior.
Explore the consequences of an alternative.

Example

"Frank, you've said several times that you believe that the workers in your unit should take the ball and run with it. Yet, you say they are dependent and continue to check with you on every new initiative. Is there anything you might be doing or saying that might be blocking their sense of independence? Might you be unwittingly giving them the sense that you'll be critical if they screw up?"

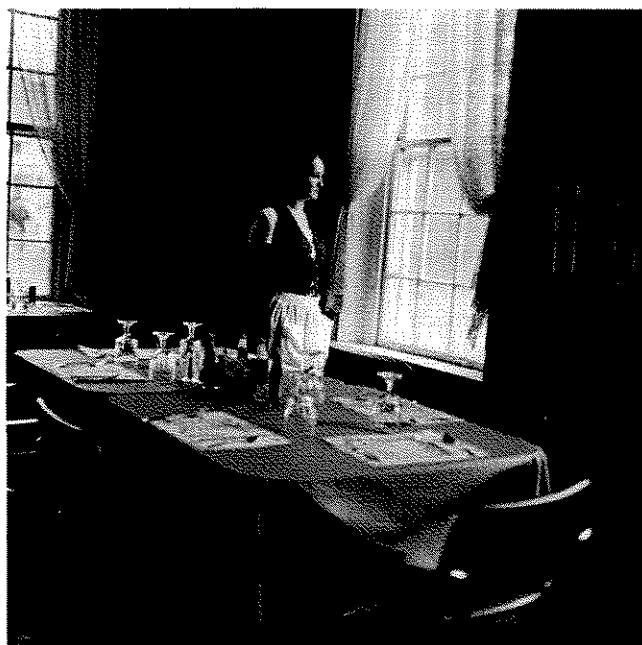
∞ Instead of being self-absorbed, we convey humility.

∞ Instead of feeling out of depth, we feel open to learn.

∞ Instead of feeling out of context, we become open to experience.

Bell's reflective response suggests that, at times, we may engage our empathy with others by viewing them and listening to them as we wish to be treated. At other times, we may wish to view others as "strange" (Isaacs, 1999), people so unlike ourselves that they require even deeper respect and attention so that we may learn to know them. Using language from Buddhist insight meditation, *being* can also be referred to as mindfulness, which represents knowing what is arising in the moment without losing track of the knower. Gregory Kramer (1998), through the practice of "insight dialogue," has explored the potential of maintaining a meditative state of being while engaged in relationship with others. Developing the discipline of folding action and reflection into one requires a good deal of skill and patience but can be learned, according to Kramer, using these guidelines:

∞ *Commit to the process*—We bring full presence to the group and commit not out of obligation but out of wisdom and compassion, allowing us to connect with one another.



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⌘ *Trust emergence; have no goals*—The universe of possibilities is not limited by a preconfigured agenda. There is no goal but to rest in the moment from which might ensue an emotional and spiritual release or an intellectual breakthrough. These are natural results, not goals.

⌘ *Balance affirmation and investigation*—We practice deep listening and maintain an attitude of inquiry. We affirm, not from a separate, limited self, but from the circle emerging within the group. We feel at ease with ourselves, confident of the group's "lovingkindness."

⌘ *Pause, reflect, contemplate*—We pause after hearing a statement, reflect on what has been said, and contemplate our feelings, the motivation for speaking, and the richness of the moment. By providing space in interactions, we can begin to understand their nature.

⌘ *Free up roles*—In the group, there is no hierarchy. We attempt to avoid the tendency to put people into pigeon holes. An open-hearted acceptance of ourselves and of others yields freedom and spontaneity to all.

⌘ *Seek out assumptions*—We actively explore the moment, searching for assumptions in our own thinking and in what others have said.

⌘ *Observe judgments*—We allow judgments to rise to consciousness in order to gain a window into our reactive nature and to open the possibility of a more even-handed way of being.

⌘ *Share parallel thinking*—Parallel thoughts are those that arise in the background as other things are expressed. In the safety of the group, we bring these forth, be they judgments, feelings of inadequacy, or observations about the processes arising in the group.

Referring to the dimensions of the model, *being* itself occupies the dimension called the *frame* mode. Framing refers to how we think about a situation, more specifically, how we select, name, and organize facts to tell a story to ourselves about what is going on and what to do in a particular situation. In the collective mode, we extend our contributions and inquiry to all members of the community, whereas in the individual mode, we hear our own voice or address one individual at a time. The cross-dimensions are "staying with self" and "taking action toward others." At times, we make personal contributions to the group or focus attention on ourselves. At other times, we extend and dedicate attention to others.

Being, as a central skill, may entail staying with oneself or taking action toward others. It is most concerned with exploring differences and diverse experiences apart from members' preconceived notions. The being skill models an inquisitive, nonjudgmental attitude toward group phenomena. Some of its components are: inviting questions and comments, considering one's own positions as hypotheses to be tested, acknowledging expressions of vulnerability by others. Consider this excerpt from a supervisor's journal as an example of being:

Sam began to challenge our very purpose. He questioned not only why we needed to meet so often, but once he got going, he seemed to be questioning why we even needed to meet at all! I had formed our team and felt a spontaneous urge to counter his negativity. But I caught myself and decided to pause and continue to listen instead. Perhaps it was good that Sam was getting his feelings out on the table. Any knee-jerk reaction by me would likely shut him down. Maybe he had a few good points? At that moment, Linda and then Paul began to share their vision for our task force, yet they did it displaying profound respect for Sam's challenge. I found myself appreciating that Sam brought his objections to the team and said so. We began to work on some of our deficiencies as a group. I think it was our best meeting.

The second reflective skill of *speaking*, at the upper left in figure 2, seeks to articulate a collective voice from within ourselves. In speaking, we attempt to characterize the state

of the group or its meaning at a given time. It may entail summoning an image to articulate meaning, suggesting group norms, or bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. In speaking, it is not necessary to prepare words in advance. We craft our message in the moment as the meaning unfolds. Consider an example from the world of symphonic music:

Michael Tilson Thomas, the famous and still relatively young American conductor, was observed, perhaps unwittingly, using the collective speaking skill when he served as guest conductor with the Chicago Symphony. Although the role of symphonic conductor is often interpreted as a directive practice in which members of the orchestra are asked to follow carefully the direction of the conductor, Thomas used a more collective approach in his rehearsal with the orchestra of Tchaikovsky's Sixth. "Of course, they had played the *Pathétique* hundreds of times," recounted Thomas. "[But] when we got to the second theme, instead of beating it note by note in the typical schoolmaster way, I raised my hands into the air and gently indicated a breathing space that would precede this phrase. At first they were baffled," but I urged, "Let's breathe together, hold the first note slightly longer, and then let the melody gracefully fall away from it." In explaining what happened next, Thomas recalled, "I couldn't make the music happen alone. We needed to share the feeling, we had to find that shape together, and we did. It was miraculous."²

In the third skill of *disclosing*, we stay within ourselves and, at the same time, share our doubts or voice our passion. By disclosing, we may unveil feelings at a given moment based on what has transpired, or we may present a story to reveal the depth of our experience. As people disclose more about themselves, the group learns more about its membership. Another cue to promote disclosing is to ask myself what I might say to help the group know me better. A story about George Washington reveals the power of disclosing.

Unknown to all but the most astute historians, there was a substantial movement during the waning years of the American Revolutionary War for the military to take over the civilian government and install Washington as king. At one historic point, Washington appeared before some of these military officers to condemn this affront to democracy, the cornerstone of the entire revolutionary movement. However, his speech was falling on deaf ears. Then, at one point, as he helplessly attempted to read a missive from a member of Congress, he paused to reach for a pair of glasses, something only his closest aides had known that he needed. Then he quietly confessed to his officers: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." The men wept. It was thought that his statement of vulnerability nipped this movement in the bud: How could the men ignore this selfless commander who reminded them that he was one of them?³

As people disclose more about themselves, the group learns more about its membership.

Testing, the fourth reflective skill, is an open-ended query directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. When testing, we may ask the group to consider its own process or may attempt to explore underlying assumptions previously taken for granted. In testing, we are trying to promote a process of collective inquiry. As a tester, we may occasionally ask for a process check or ask if someone might act out a scenario to explore an option. Perhaps readers are familiar with the "Abilene Paradox," an interpersonal dynamic described by Jerry Harvey (1988). Harvey coined the terms when pondering why he and some family members took an exhausting trip in a dust storm to Abilene, 53 miles away, when not one person in their party actually wanted to go there. Because we have an unfortunate tendency in everyday life to communicate the very opposite of our wishes based on our assumptions of the desires of others, the testing skill can become indispensable. We need to develop the courage to inquire about our mutual desires and actions if we are to successfully manage agreement.

Finally, in *probing*, we make a direct inquiry, typically to one member at a time, to find out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. For example, probing might attempt to point out inconsistencies in members' reasoning patterns, perhaps helping them to uncover the assumptions and

beliefs behind particular actions. When probing, however, we need to be careful not to interrogate or make any member feel he or she has been put on the spot or on the defensive. On the other hand, probing may initially make some members uncomfortable if they are asked to consider assumptions that had been hidden even from their own consciousness. As an example, consider a frank inquiry posed to a group member, Mark: "Mark, every time that I can recall when we've thought about broaching our plans with Lisa, you chime in saying that she is someone whom no one can work with and a person to be avoided at all costs. I wonder if you've had some experiences with her you can share that would help us, and perhaps you too, understand what seems to be making Lisa such an obstacle. Maybe there is a way that would make it possible for one of us to approach her."

So, how would Susan and Charlie from the initial vignette interact under reflective practice conditions? Let's see how the conversation might have changed. See if you can detect Susan's interest in building a reflective community and more specifically in her use of the *being* skill, followed by Charlie's use of the *disclosing* and *probing* skills:

"Susan, you're next. As you know, we figure the Cadlink merger is going ahead. They expect their Wentworth localization unit to be merged with your marketing group. What do you think?"

"Charlie, thanks for giving me your confidence. Frankly, I'm concerned. Even though I had earlier been pretty vocal about my support of the merger and had told Jeff that I believed we could assimilate Wentworth, I have new data suggesting that their work methods might not converge with ours. We need to get them in the room, but I'm not sure how to broach the matter. You've had conversations with them before. What do you suggest?"

"Susan, I'm somewhat fearful that they might think we're back-pedaling here, and my word is on the line. But I appreciate your frankness. By being up-front, I think I can show Jeff why this matter is too important to rush. I also know their marketing VP. But before we approach her and her group, let's hear about the new data that you have. What operating methods of theirs do you anticipate to be problematic?"

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Ed Schein for his generous comments on this article.

Notes

1. I am grateful to David Hardy, of the Bank of Montreal, for demonstrating the concept of the "solution database."
2. The Thomas account is from D. Schiff, "An Older, Wiser, Humbler Wunderkind." *New York Times Magazine* (August 20, 1995): 31.
3. This story of Washington was described in O. Guinness, ed. *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzhenitsyn* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999): 37.

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Commentary

by Phillip DiChiara

In the mid and late 1990s, abundant venture capital catalyzed the rapid growth of fledgling organizations, many of which placed great emphasis on market share, virtuality, personal fulfillment, and overall staff satisfaction. Technology firms in particular proudly provided space for recreation with the hope of encouraging dialogue and teamwork. Many new ventures assumed that highly motivated employees would view work as play, play as work, and professional fulfillment as essential to their continued commitment to the often-entrepreneurial task at hand. The spoken intent was to recruit the best talent at any cost, to provide a nurturing environment for innovation, and to create teams that would succeed.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that "safe space," physical or otherwise, for individual or group reflection was often less a reality than an optimistic promise. Joseph Raelin's article reminds me that, for many practitioners, the concept of reflective practice is essentially unknown.

As Raelin notes, there are many reasons why reflection should be brought out in the open, and there are strategies to encourage its use. Within the efforts of The Boston Consortium for Higher Education, a young collaborative focused on addressing the shared problems faced in the administration of member colleges, we believe reflective practice has been an essential part of our success thus far.

As our groups evolve from informal meetings within a discipline, but across several different school organizations, community building is not left to chance. A clear sense of shared interest and vision is essential, and creates the fertile ground on which reflective practice can be nurtured. Encouragement from senior staff may catalyze initial involvement, but few managers can afford, or want, to spend time in meetings that do not provide a return on their investment of time. Additionally, they value sessions that allow them to engage their peers in settings that are relaxed but clearly focused on how their collective knowledge can reduce workload or enhance the quality and sophistication of their respective operations.

Facilitating the correct balance between "getting down to business" and nurturing an environment that permits reflection is not easily accomplished. It is however, necessary, as too little of either will discourage further involvement in a newly formed group. It is modulated differently from group to group, within a group, and often within a topic. The skills of reflective practice, detailed in the article, can be readily observed in sessions involving our more matured communities of practice.

The consortium initially employs a coordinator, who, with solid facilitation skills, assists a group in discovering and sharing their common concerns. As dialogue leads to relationships, time for reflection is created by simple but effective tools such as collective review of previous meeting notes or informal updates on the seemingly unrelated problems they have had to tackle in order to move the effort ahead.

In some cases, casual dialogue before and after meetings involves sharing of often-humorous episodes encountered in merely finding the time to attend a group meeting. We suspect that this is evidence that value is placed on attending the meeting. It would also appear to resonate with the value we discover in stepping back and observing our activities, as conditioned as we may be to doing otherwise. Public reflection in a trustful environment brings attention to the flurry of activity that often acts as a substitute for thoughtful analysis. An individual's ability to observe his or her approach apart from and outside of the traditional organizational setting is an important benefit of reflective practice within consortia, and we believe, very much a part of the attraction of participating in a community of practice.

Unfortunately, not all communities evolve at the same pace, and some, despite able assistance, do not achieve their full potential. What would appear to distinguish them is the degree to which the group becomes comfortable with observing itself and others. Groups that are hell-bent on achievement often meet their objective, but seem to cycle out of productive existence. Other groups, frequently populated with two or more personalities that are biased toward inquiry, typi-



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- . Who steps out of the traditional bounds of society and why?
- . What do they hope to accomplish?
- . What do they find?
- . How does society respond to them?

Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, Jack Kerouac, Captain Paul Watson, Cheryl Strayed, Anne LaBastille, Beryl Markham, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Edward Snowden, John Muir, Timothy Treadwell, Ted Kaczynski, Paul Gauguin, Allen Ginsberg, George Carlin, Bill Hicks, Daniel Ellsberg, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Morton (see Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount"), St. Francis, Hermann Hesse (see *Siddhartha*), John Brown, Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Ho Chi Minh, Galileo Galilei, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Wallace, George Washington . . .

One theme explored in depth throughout *Into The Wild* is the fine line between hubris (excessive pride or self-confidence) and deliberately living one's life on the edge. A number of Alaskans argue that Chris McCandless brought about his own demise by going into the wild without sufficient respect for the wilderness. Others believe that Chris understood the risks he took and that he did so deliberately because he wished to push himself to the limits of his ability.

Did Chris act recklessly when he walked into the Alaskan wilderness or did his actions reflect the certitude of an individual testing his own fortitude?

least 500 words. In your conclusion, state your claim, support your argument with evidence, and explain how you reached your conclusion.

WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR.

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AT A CERTAIN season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it- took everything but a deed of it- took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk- cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends.

Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a sedes, a seat?-better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot, and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow, perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms- the refusal was all I wanted- but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife- every man has such a wife- changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,

"I am monarch of all I survey, My right there is none to dispute."

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being, about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by abroad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, nawned by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple

any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulders- I never heard what compensation he received for that- and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale- I have always cultivated a garden- was, that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.

Old Cato, whose "De Re Rustica" is my "Cultivator," says- and the only translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage-"When you think of getting a farm turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good." I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last.

The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experience of two years into one. As I have said, I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and windowcasings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.

The only house I had been the owner of before, if I except a boat, was a tent, which I used occasionally when making excursions in the summer, and this is still rolled up in my garret; but the boat, after passing from hand to hand, has gone down the stream of time. With this more substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling in the world. This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need To go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather. The Harivansa says, "An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning." Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only nearer to some of those which commonly frequent the garden and the orchard, but to those smaller and more thrilling songsters of the forest which never, or rarely, serenade a villager- the woodthrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field sparrow, the whip-poor-will, and many others.

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln, and about

horizon. For the first week, whenever I looked out on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle. The very dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the day than usual, as on the sides of mountains.

This small lake was of most value as a neighbor in the intervals of a gentle rain-storm in August, when, both air and water being perfectly still, but the sky overcast, mid-afternoon had all the serenity of evening, and the wood thrush sang around, and was heard from shore to shore. A lake like this is never smoother than at such a time; and the clear portion of the air above it being, shallow and darkened by clouds, the water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself so much the more important. From a hill-top near by, where the wood had been recently cut off, there was a pleasing vista southward across the pond, through a wide indentation in the hills which form the shore there, where their opposite sides sloping toward each other suggested a stream flowing out in that direction through a wooded valley, but stream there was none. That way I looked between and over the near green hills to some distant and higher ones in the horizon, tinged with blue. Indeed, by standing on tiptoe I could catch a glimpse of some of the peaks of the still bluer and more distant mountain ranges in the northwest, those true-blue coins from heaven's own mint, and also of some portion of the village. But in other directions, even from this point, I could not see over or beyond the woods which surrounded me. It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool. When I looked across the pond from this peak toward the Sudbury meadows, which in time of flood I distinguished elevated perhaps by a mirage in their seething valley, like a coin in a basin, all the earth beyond the pond appeared like a thin crust insulated and floated even by this small sheet of interverting water, and I was reminded that this on which I dwelt was but dry land.

Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon"- said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures.

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was that part of creation where I had squatted;

"There was a shepherd that did live, And held his thoughts as high As were the mounts whereon his flocks Did hourly feed him by."

What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching, thence to this effect:

Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint burn of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sailing with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air- to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the faire stand most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan- like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes,

hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for work, we haven't any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus' dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a woman, I might almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire- or to see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish church itself. Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, "What's the news?" as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be waked every half-hour, doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. "Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe"- and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself.

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life- I wrote this some years ago- that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one

with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure- news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right proportions- they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers- and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649; and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year, you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted.

What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old! "Kieou-he-yu (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to Khoung-tseu to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot come to the end of them. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy messenger! What a worthy messenger!" The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the week- for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not the fresh and brave beginning of a new one-with this one other draggle-tail of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, "Pause! Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?"

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul," continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahme." I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that is which appears to be. If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the "Mill-dam" go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual

answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it.

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry-determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest of the way is down hill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor, sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.

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TEENS

Why the Teen Brain Is Drawn to Risk

By Maia Szalavitz @maiasz Oct. 02, 2012 0

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If you're the parent of a tween, be warned: your cautious 10-year-old is bound to turn into a wild child in a few short years, with seemingly no regard whatsoever for safety. Indeed, teenagers have the double the risk of dying compared to their preteen selves.

Adults have long reckoned with ways to protect adolescents from their own misjudgments. Only recently, however, have researchers really begun to understand how the teen brain is wired and that some of what appear to be teens' senseless choices may result from biological tendencies that also prime their brains to learn and be flexible.

Take teens' perception of risk. It's certainly different from that of adults, but not in the ways you'd expect. Research shows, for instance, that teens tend to wildly *overestimate* certain risks — of things like unprotected sex and drug use — not to lowball them as one would predict. So, it may be that teens' notorious risk-taking behavior stems not from some immunity to known risks, but rather, as a new study now suggests, from their greater tolerance to uncertainty and ambiguity — that is, *unknown* risks.

"Relative to adults, adolescents engage more in unknown risks than they do in known risks," says Agnieszka Tymula, a postdoctoral student at New York University and the lead author of the study, which was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Teens, it seems, love the unknown.

(**MORE:** The Half-Baked Teen Brain: A Hazard or a Virtue?)

To examine the differences in risk-taking between teens and adults, researchers studied 33 healthy adolescents aged 12 to 17, along with 30 normal adults aged 30 to 50. They all engaged in a gambling game, in which they could take a definite \$5 reward or choose between the possibility of getting a much larger payout or nothing at all. The payout was based on whether there was a greater number of red or blue poker chips in a stack of 100; to vary the ambiguity, larger or smaller portions of the stacks were hidden from view.

In this way, the trials provided different amounts of information about the risks involved: for example, in some trials, participants could choose between the \$5 and a clear 50% chance of winning \$50. In others, however, they had a choice between \$5 and varying amounts of money, up to \$125, but the probability of winning appeared to vary from 25% to 75%. In reality, they always had a 50% chance of winning, but were led to believe their odds varied, which allowed researchers to look at how participants thought about ambiguity.

"If the risks are known, adolescents engage [in risk-taking] less than adults do, but if they are unknown, this is reversed," Tymula says. In fact, when the payout was known to be \$125, adults always gambled — but this was not so for teens.

"I think [the finding] adds very nicely to the literature," says Valerie Reyna, professor of human development and psychology at Cornell University, who was not associated with the research. "The new breakthrough here is that it extends our knowledge about adolescent risk-taking into the realm of ambiguity aversion."

Reyna's own research has shown how excessively teens tend to overestimate risk: for example, when asked about the risk of AIDS in one study, adolescents estimated that a teenage girl who is sexually active has a 60% chance of contracting HIV. (The actual odds are miniscule for most Americans.)



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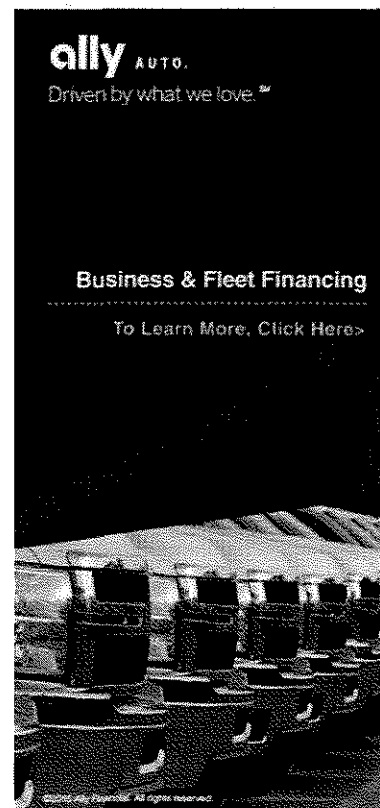
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So why might the teenage brain be wired this way? Their greater tolerance for uncertainty and the unknown — and an increased desire for and focus on rewards — probably helps them leave the nest. Such explanations are speculative, Reyna cautions, but notes that “in rats, for example, adolescent rats are more likely to explore a new environment. You don’t know what you’re going to find: that’s sort of the definition of a novel environment. If you are more ambiguity tolerant, that would enable that sort of exploration.”

An early part of learning any type of new skill — from typing to teaching — is accepting instruction and consciously thinking about all of the tactics and techniques involved in performing the skill. While novices need to think step-by-step, however, experts will have incorporated the best routines into their brains to the point that they become automatic. This may be why the teen brain uses the higher-order cortex for risk decisions: it hasn't yet made enough of them to develop an intuitive reaction that it can "offload" to other brain regions.

Such new information about how the teen brain works — and why its characteristics shouldn't simply be seen as negative or dysfunctional — is only just beginning to inform teen health programs. Reyna, for example, has studied how teaching “gist”-based reasoning can help teens avoid dangerous sexual choices, finding that teens who are taught to focus on potential, catastrophic negative outcomes, rather than the odds, make fewer risky sexual decisions and have fewer partners.

Tymula suggests that allowing teens opportunities to safely experiment — for example, a simulator that shows sober teens what drunk driving is like — could also help, by making an unknown risk seem more real and known. Allowing teens the opportunity to take risks in a safe context could also help them develop expertise that underlies gist-based thinking.

Meanwhile, it's interesting to note that while adults tend to prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty, as family therapist Virginia Satir once put it, the same may not be true for teens.

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Maia Szalavitz is a health writer at TIME.com. Find her on Twitter at @maiasz. You can also continue the discussion on TIME Healthland's Facebook page and on Twitter at @TIMEHealthland.



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Maia Szalavitz is a neuroscience journalist for TIME.com and co-author of *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential — and Endangered*.



Szalavitz's latest book is *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential – and Endangered*. It is co-written with Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading expert in the neuroscience of child trauma and

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Into the Wild: 3 hikers rescued near scene of fatal Alaska adventure

May 29, 2013 | By Kim Murphy

SEATTLE — For years, it has proved an irresistible lure for intrepid travelers around the world: the battered, weed-grown bus where hiker Chris McCandless died after trying, and failing, to survive in the great Alaskan wilderness.

McCandless' demise out in the big lonely was chronicled in the book and movie, "Into the Wild." This week three German travelers were rescued by helicopter after attempting to repeat the young dreamer's trip—running afoul of the same raging river that kept McCandless from hiking to safety.

"They decided they were just worn out and exhausted. They'd already had one mishap and they weren't going to have another," Alaska State Troopers spokeswoman Megan Peters said.

A hiker who'd met the three men on the trail alerted troopers that the three had set out for the famous bus, about 20 miles from the end of Stampede Road near the town of Healy. But as of Monday, three days later, they had not returned.

A helicopter crew launched a search and found them within about 10 minutes, all "in fair condition, but hungry and wet," according to the troopers' dispatch.

Peters said the trio had apparently reached the bus. But on the way back, one of them fell and lost a lot of his gear while crossing the swollen Teklanika River—the same river that lay between McCandless and safety in 1992.

The hikers continued on to the second crossing on the Savage River, but with that waterway running high, too, "they just decided it was not a good idea to cross it," Peters said.

The three hikers, Florian Gerner, 21, Roger Karl, 20, and Eric Schlegel, 19, were examined and cleared by medics in Healy.

The story of "Into the Wild" has become a touchstone for people around the world, both those who yearn to repeat a young urban man's dangerous foray into some of the nation's last true wilderness, and those who have dismissed McCandless as a clueless adventurer who went into hazardous territory dangerously unprepared.

"He was not a hero, he was a spoiled brat who didn't even bother to learn about the land he was going into. His hubris killed him," one commenter wrote after the Alaska Dispatch posted the story about the German hikers.

But Erik Halfacre, an Anchorage designer and videographer who operates a website and video with advice for adventurers inclined to make their way out to the bus, said more than 100 people a year successfully make the journey. Others, however, must be rescued in places all over Alaska after attempting much more dangerous travels.

"It's interesting to me that people get that upset about the idea that anybody might want to go see the bus where Chris lived," he said.

"The hike is really not that dangerous and the number of rescues on the trail are not that disproportionate compared to other areas of the state. But people get upset because they don't like Chris," he said. "They think he went out totally unprepared, and he didn't have enough respect, which may be partially true. But there's been a lot of other people that's happened to that they haven't raked over the coals quite so hard. But those people didn't get a movie made about them."

The bus, an old International Harvester left as a wilderness shelter by a construction company in the 1960s, rests south of Denali National Park. McCandless, 24, a native of El Segundo, was a devotee of Henry David Thoreau and Jack London and had hoped to embark on a period of solitary contemplation.

He took little food with him, though, was unskilled in finding sustenance in the wilderness and may have fallen ill. He was found in the bus four months after he set out, weighing only 67 pounds, likely dead of starvation.

"S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out," said a note he left on the bus, found by a hunter. "I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless."

The lure of the bus had previously claimed another victim: 29-year-old Claire Jane Ackermann of Switzerland, drowned in 2010 while trying to cross the Teklanika River near the bus.

There have been frequent calls to remove the bus and end the need for further rescues. Those appeals started up again this week.

"Some would say that bus needs to be hauled off with lots of publicity so no one else ventures there and dies," one woman commented to the Dispatch. "I, however, say it should be left there. It is just another device through which the Universe culls the herd."

Peters said there are no plans to remove it.

"It's a matter of who it belongs to, who's going to pay for it to be moved. It's just there," she said. "We've got mountains that people get lost and hurt on and we don't move them."

Another idea gaining support is to construct a safe crossing over the Teklanika. McCandless' sister, Carine McCandless, and members of Ackermann's family are looking into rebuilding a cable crossing, disabled by vandals, that once traversed the river on the trail to the bus.

"They'd like to either construct a road bridge or a cable trolley or some means for walkers to cross the river again," Halfacre said. "It probably costs a few

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“And if they were to construct a bridge or reconstruct this cable car, you’d never have to do these rescues again.”

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Did Jon Krakauer Finally Solve 'Into The Wild' Mystery?

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September 13, 2013 · 4:40 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered

In 1992, a young man headed into the Alaskan wilderness seeking a new way of life and perhaps an escape from the modern world. Four months later, emaciated and helpless, he died. This short, fatal experiment with simple living was exhaustively explored by Jon Krakauer in his book, *Into The Wild*. But one core mystery remained: Was the journey a slow-motion suicide mission? Or was his death an accident? Jon Krakauer had a theory: unintentional poisoning. Now, he thinks he has proof. He tells Audie Cornish about the new evidence.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Audie Cornish.

Back in 1992, a young man headed into the Alaskan wilderness seeking a new way of life, perhaps an escape from the modern world. Four months later, emaciated and helpless, he died. The story of Christopher McCandless and his short, fatal experiment with simple living was exhaustively explored in a 1996 book by Jon Krakauer. It's called "Into the Wild." But one core mystery remained: Was McCandless' journey a slow-motion suicide mission, the results of recklessness or ignorance about the realities of living in the wild? Or was his death an accident?

Jon Krakauer had a theory: Unintentional poisoning. But now, Krakauer thinks he has proof. Krakauer joins us now from Boulder, Colorado. Jon, welcome to the program.

JON KRAKAUER: Thank you.

CORNISH: So a lot of what people know about Christopher McCandless came from his journal, right? He actually kept writing about his experience. And what did it tell you about how he lived and how he died?

KRAKAUER: Well, the journal is very brief and cryptic, so you have to interpret it. But he recorded all the food that he killed. He noted the plants that he ate. He recorded the weather on pieces of birch bark. So - and he also took a lot of photographs that were recovered with his body, several rolls of film. So - and his photographs show what he was eating. So things were going pretty well in July when he - early July when he returned to the bus after trying and failing to cross the river because it was so hot. So he...

CORNISH: And this is a bus that was a makeshift shelter that was just out there already.

KRAKAUER: It was out there already. It had been used for many years by hunters and trappers out at the stampede trails it's called, like a day's journey from the road. It was kind of this midway station. And he stumbled upon it by chance, and it had this wood stove in it and a bed in the back and it was - it's in a pretty place, and he thought it was a great place to make it his base camp. So that's where he lived for most of these three and a half months.

So he decided just to keep living at the bus, foraging food, killing small game. And things were going pretty well. Until the end of July, there's this ominous journal entry, July 30th. It reads: extremely weak. Fault of potato seed. Much trouble just to stand up. Starving. Great jeopardy. You know, before this entry, there's nothing to suggest he was in trouble. After that, there's other signs in his journal that, you know, he was in big trouble. And then a little over three weeks later, on August 18, he crawled in the back of the bus and died.

Well, this led me to conclude, as it would almost anybody, that the seeds had somehow laid him low, maybe killed him outright. So I sent these seeds - I collected some seeds when I visited the bus and sent these seeds to an esteemed biochemist in Fairbanks and had them tested. And the chemist - they came back and the chemist said, no, these plants aren't poisonous. He said, you know, I tore this plant apart. I'd eat it myself.

So that perplexed me. I mean, how do I reconcile what the chemist said with what McCandless' journal said? So I just kept combing the scientific literature. And by chance, I came across this essay by Ronald Hamilton.

CORNISH: And this gentleman named Ron Hamilton helps you get to the bottom of things, right, from an unlikely place, right? He looks to World War II and concentration camp victims.

KRAKAUER: Right. And it was a place no one had thought to look before or no one I knew about, and it was brilliant. I mean, he, you know, Hamilton deserves the credit for this. He's the guy that figured this out. And he was familiar with this concentration camp called Vapniarka in the Ukraine during World War II where Jews were kept. And at this concentration camp, one of the officers decided to conduct this grotesque experiment where he fed the inmates a plant called grass pea, very similar to the plant that McCandless ate, the wild potato.

He fed them this seed of the grass pea, which had been eaten for centuries and had been known to be toxic under certain conditions. It had been known since at least 400 B.C. And he wanted to, you know, he was just being sadistic and he wanted to study the symptoms. And it turns out, when people eat the grass pea, especially when they are not getting enough food otherwise and have a limited diet, they become paralyzed. Their legs become paralyzed. They become too weak to walk, much trouble just to stand up.

And Ron Hamilton, after reading "Into the Wild" had this aha moment, and he wondered if it could be the same toxic agent, ODAP. It's a neurotoxin and amino acid. And Hamilton decided to test wild potato seeds to see if they also had ODAP, this poison. So he got some seeds. He sent them to the chemistry department of the university where he worked. And they did some testing, which highly suggested that yes, these seeds did indeed contain ODAP.

So I simply took the final step, as I also last August got a hold of some wild potato seeds, and sent them to a very sophisticated lab in Ann Arbor that had state-of-the-art techniques. And sure enough, absolutely, definitely, certainly the wild potato seeds contained ODAP, this deadly neurotoxin that causes paralysis if you eat it when you're not getting enough other nutrients.

CORNISH: Jon, why was it important to you to get to the bottom of this? I mean, does it have to do with this debate about whether or not Christopher McCandless had acted recklessly? I mean, is that something you felt you needed to defend against?

KRAKAUER: Yeah, I did. I mean, I should say, right away. As I point out in the very first pages of "Into the Wild," I approached this book not as a normal, you know, unbiased journalist. I admitted that I identified with McCandless very much. When I was his age, when I was 23, a year younger - he was 24 when he died. When I was 23, I went to Alaska by myself into the glaciers of the coast range and climbed a mountain by myself. It was incredibly reckless, incredibly stupid. But I was lucky. And I survived, and I came back to tell my story.

And I was not suicidal. I was just young and suffered from the stupidity and hubris of youth. And I believe McCandless was very much, you know, the same way, that he wasn't trying to kill himself. He was trying to test himself. And he wasn't very careful about it. So it was important to me, you know, to defend McCandless against his critics, and they are a legion, who say he was suicidal or an idiot. I - and I just wanted to know. And I wrote this book and I speculated that these seeds had killed him, and everyone keeps saying, well, the seeds aren't poisonous.

And that journal entry about extremely weak, fault of potato seed kept gnawing at me, and it was important to me. It was important to me to get the book right, you know? If it hadn't - if the seeds hadn't contained ODAP, I would have put that in a new edition of the book: Well, it seems like the seeds didn't kill him, that he just starved to death out of stupidity. But I don't have to write that now. I can write the opposite.

CORNISH: Jon Krakauer, author of the book "Into the Wild." His latest article is online at the New Yorker. Jon Krakauer, thank you for speaking with me.

KRAKAUER: You're welcome.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: This is NPR News.

PAGE-TURNER

HOW CHRIS MCCANDLESS DIED

By Jon Krakauer, SEPTEMBER 12, 2013

Twenty-one years ago this month, on September 6, 1992, the decomposed body of Christopher McCandless was discovered by moose hunters just outside the northern boundary of Denali National Park. He had died inside a rusting bus that served as a makeshift shelter for trappers, dog mushers, and other backcountry visitors. Taped to the door was a note scrawled on a page torn from a novel by Nikolai Gogol:

ATTENTION POSSIBLE VISITORS.

S.O.S.

I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH, AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL ALONE, THIS IS *NO JOKE*. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME. I AM OUT COLLECTING BERRIES CLOSE BY AND SHALL RETURN THIS EVENING. THANK YOU,

CHRIS MCCANDLESS

AUGUST ?

From a cryptic diary found among his possessions, it appeared that McCandless had been dead for nineteen days. A driver's license issued eight months before he perished indicated that he was twenty-four years old and weighed a hundred and forty pounds. After his body was flown out of the wilderness, an autopsy determined that it weighed sixty-seven pounds and lacked discernible subcutaneous fat. The probable cause of death, according to the coroner's report, was starvation.

In "Into the Wild," the book I wrote about McCandless's brief, confounding life, I came to a different conclusion. I speculated that he had inadvertently poisoned himself by eating seeds from a plant commonly called wild potato, known to botanists as *Hedysarum alpinum*. According to my hypothesis, a toxic alkaloid in the seeds weakened McCandless to such a degree that it became impossible for him to

alpinum is described as a nontoxic species in both the scientific literature and in popular books about edible plants, my conjecture was met with no small amount of derision, especially in Alaska.

I've received thousands of letters from people who admire McCandless for his rejection of conformity and materialism in order to discover what was authentic and what was not, to test himself, to experience the raw throb of life without a safety net. But I've also received plenty of mail from people who think he was an idiot who came to grief because he was arrogant, woefully unprepared, mentally unbalanced, and possibly suicidal. Most of these detractors believe my book glorifies a senseless death. As the columnist Craig Medred wrote in the Anchorage *Daily News* in 2007,

"Into the Wild" is a misrepresentation, a sham, a fraud. There, I've finally said what somebody has needed to say for a long time Krakauer took a poor misfortunate prone to paranoia, someone who left a note talking about his desire to kill the "false being within," someone who managed to starve to death in a deserted bus not far off the George Parks Highway, and made the guy into a celebrity. Why the author did that should be obvious. He wanted to write a story that would sell.

The debate over why McCandless perished, and the related question of whether he is worthy of admiration, has been smoldering, and occasionally flaring, for more than two decades now. But last December, a writer named Ronald Hamilton posted a paper on the Internet that brings fascinating new facts to the discussion. Hamilton, it turns out, has discovered hitherto unknown evidence that appears to close the book on the cause of McCandless's death.

To appreciate the brilliance of Hamilton's investigative work, some backstory is helpful. The diary and photographs recovered with McCandless's body indicated that, beginning on June 24, 1992, the roots of the *Hedysarum alpinum* plant became a staple of his daily diet. On July 14th, he started harvesting and eating *Hedysarum alpinum* seeds as well. One of his photos depicts a one-gallon Ziploc bag stuffed with these seeds. When I visited the bus in July, 1993, wild-potato plants were growing everywhere I looked in the surrounding taiga. I filled a one-gallon bag with more than a pound of seeds in less than thirty minutes.

On July 30th, McCandless wrote in his journal, "EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT[ATO] SEED. MUCH TROUBLE JUST TO STAND UP. STARVING. GREAT JEOPARDY."

straits, although his photos show he'd grown alarmingly gaunt. After subsisting for three months on a marginal diet of squirrels, porcupines, small birds, mushrooms, roots, and berries, he'd run up a huge caloric deficit and was teetering on the brink. By adding potato seeds to the menu, he apparently made the mistake that took him down. After July 30th, his physical condition went to hell, and three weeks later he was dead.

When McCandless's body was found in the Alaskan bush, *Outside* magazine asked me to write about the puzzling circumstances of his demise. Working on a tight deadline, I researched and wrote an eighty-four-hundred-word piece, published in January, 1993. Because the wild potato was universally believed to be safe to eat, in this article I speculated that McCandless had mistakenly consumed the seeds of the wild sweet pea, *Hedysarum mackenzii*—a plant thought to be toxic, and which is hard to distinguish from *Hedysarum alpinum*. I attributed his death to this blunder.

As I began expanding my article into a book and had more time to ponder the evidence, however, it struck me as extremely unlikely that he'd failed to tell the two species apart. He wrote his diary on blank pages in the back of an exhaustively researched field guide to the region's edible plants, "Tanaina Plantlore / Dena'ina K'et'una: An Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska," by Priscilla Russell Kari. In the book, Kari explicitly warns that because wild sweet pea closely resembles wild potato, and "is reported to be poisonous, care should be taken to identify them accurately before attempting to use the wild potato as food." And then she explains precisely how to distinguish the two plants from one another.

It seemed more plausible that McCandless had indeed eaten the roots and seeds of the purportedly nontoxic wild potato rather than the wild sweet pea. So I sent some *Hedysarum alpinum* seeds I'd collected near the bus to Dr. Thomas Clausen, a professor in the biochemistry department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, for analysis.

Shortly before my book was published, Clausen and one of his graduate students, Edward Treadwell, conducted a preliminary test that indicated the seeds contained an unidentified alkaloid. Making a rash intuitive leap, in the first edition of "Into the Wild" published in January 1996 I wrote that this alkaloid was perhaps

swainsonine, a toxic agent known to inhibit glycoprotein metabolism in animals, leading to starvation. When Clausen and Treadwell completed their analysis of wild-potato seeds, though, they found no trace of swainsonine or any other alkaloids. “I tore that plant apart,” Dr. Clausen explained to *Men’s Journal* in 2007, after also testing the seeds for non-alkaloid compounds. “There were no toxins. No alkaloids. I’d eat it myself.”

I was perplexed. Clausen was an esteemed organic chemist, and the results of his analysis seemed irrefutable. But McCandless’s July 30th journal entry couldn’t have been more explicit: “EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT[ATO] SEED.” His certainty about the cause of his failing health gnawed at me. I began sifting through the scientific literature, searching for information that would allow me to reconcile McCandless’s adamantly unambiguous statement with Clausen’s equally unambiguous test results.

Fast forward to a couple of months ago, when I stumbled upon Ronald Hamilton’s paper “The Silent Fire: ODAP and the Death of Christopher McCandless,” which Hamilton had posted on a Web site that publishes essays and papers about McCandless. Hamilton’s essay offered persuasive new evidence that the wild-potato plant is highly toxic in and of itself, contrary to the assurances of Thomas Clausen and every other expert who has ever weighed in on the subject. The toxic agent in *Hedysarum alpinum* turns out not to be an alkaloid but, rather, an amino acid, and according to Hamilton it was the chief cause of McCandless’s death. His theory validates my conviction that McCandless wasn’t as clueless and incompetent as his detractors have made him out to be.

Hamilton is neither a botanist nor a chemist; he’s a writer who until recently worked as a bookbinder at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania library. As Hamilton explains it, he became acquainted with the McCandless story in 2002, when he happened upon a copy of “Into the Wild,” flipped through its pages, and suddenly thought to himself, I know why this guy died. His hunch derived from his knowledge of Vapniarka, a little-known Second World War concentration camp in what was then German-occupied Ukraine.

“I first learned about Vapniarka through a book whose title I’ve long forgotten,”