

Talk #10 A Mind of One's Own

A personality is a socially developed person, one who is part of a certain specific historical and natural context, one or another social group, a person possessing a relatively stable system of socially significant personal features and performing corresponding social roles . . . The central feature of the personality is world outlook. A person cannot become a personality without evolving what is known as a world outlook or world-view, which includes his philosophical view of the world.

– A. Spirkin

Ask not what's inside your head, but what your head is inside of.

– J. J. Gibson

Thea: One area of application for this theory of mind might be the concept of personality. That field still lacks a solid foundation; and there have been almost as many theories of personality as first-rank psychotherapists. Do you have any thoughts about this?

Guy: I don't know of any work in personality theory from an eD perspective. Forty years ago, Bateson suggested that we understand mental structure in ecological terms, and I believe that is where personality theory should go; but, so far as I'm aware, it has yet to do so. How do therapists understand the concept of "personality" today?

Thea: Gordon Allport defined personality as "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psycho-physical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment." Other definitions have been proposed,¹ but Allport's version remains as good as any. "In practice," one

1 *Personality: A psychological interpretation*, Allport, G.W. (1937) More recently, Carver and Scheier (2000, p.5) defined personality in essentially the same way as "a dynamic organization, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create a person's characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts,

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website says, “personality is how we see ourselves and others.”² It is how we describe a person as noisy, thoughtful, decisive and so on.” With your concepts of ecology and suggestion, can you get any further?

the mind's ecology

Guy: Perhaps. At least, we can understand Allport’s “dynamic organization” more concretely than before, as a system of re-suggestive structures maintained and deployed by the individual to evaluate and respond to the suggestions his world presents. There will be threats, opportunities, demands and issues of all sorts – of course, with different suggestions and mixtures of suggestion offered to each individual.

As the word suggests, personality was originally conceived as a kind of mask, a “face to meet the faces that you meet.” Today we can think of it in re-suggestive terms as an habitual structure of patterns through which the individual constitutes himself as an effective agent, copes with his world, and presents a coherent face to others.

Thea: I know we discussed this once already,³ but I still don’t see why you insist on speaking of “a system of re-suggestive structures,” when we already have the concept of a script. We speak of sexual scripts, scripts for mothering and fathering, scripts for parties, for eating in restaurants, for buying and selling in various situations. We have scripts for all kinds of things. What is gained by re-labeling these as “re-suggestive structures”? A much clumsier term, it seems to me.

Guy: A script is one kind of re-suggestive structure, but the reverse isn’t true. For example, you don’t usually think of your language or the house we live in as scripts though they certainly are powerful sources of suggestion. Also, I think that words like script or program give a misleading impression of the structures of personality, implying that we are more robotic than is the case.

Thea: So your quarrel is with the word “determine,” in Allport’s definition? For you, the structures of personality are sources of suggestion, not controlling rules.

Guy: Yes, exactly. My point is that we should think of personality
and feelings.”

2 http://changingminds.org/explanations/personality/personality_is.htm

3 See Talk #3.

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neither as a permanent structure, nor as a mere assortment of traits, but as an eco-system of co-evolving sources of suggestion, in competition for air time and influence even as they collaborate to produce a lifestyle – hopefully, a viable and satisfying one.⁴

There may be “conversion” episodes in which the personality system flips over from one mode of organization to another. But apart from these, personality remains loosely stable over the course of a life-time, changing gradually through a re-entrant, evolutionary process while co-constructing more or less durable social relationships.

Thea: The crucial point, if I understand you, is in the analogy you want between personalities, politics and eco-systems. Talk about “the inner committee” is something of a commonplace, but the implications of this metaphor have not been much explored by personality theorists, so far as I know.

Guy: That’s my impression too. We tend to think of personalities, like government regimes, as more unified, but also as more chaotic than they really are. And we tend to overlook the irreducible mixture of collaboration and strife by which such systems are constituted and maintained. A generalized concept of ecology (along the lines Bateson recommended) would avoid both errors.

Thea: Doesn’t the notion of personality point rather at the resolution of internal conflict? You’ve said that the structures of personality provide a context for the evaluation and reconciliation of competing suggestions, but what does that actually mean? Presented with suggestions to go to a party or stay home and study, the ambitious or conscientious individual makes one choice; the “party animal” makes another. In either case the concept of personality corresponds to the choice this individual typically makes, in such a situation. How does that gibe with the concept of personality as a politician’s internal committee?

Guy: Personality indeed works to resolve inner conflicts, but can rarely do this seamlessly as it is itself conflicted. Moreover, it is precisely this inherent politician’sness of personality that makes room for adaptive change. That’s why we speak of these systems as hovering on “the edge of chaos.” In your field, when there is too much stability you speak of a rigid

4 By “air time” (a metaphor from the broadcast media) I mean opportunity for expression, subject to the motor constraints of a human body.

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personality. With too much conflict, you speak of an impulse-driven or fragmented one.

Thea: A healthy personality, we agree, must be one with some conflict but not too much.

Guy: A healthy personality contains and lives through its conflicts without repressing one side or the other. For example, it can acknowledge temptations as attractive, even when it does not give in. And it can pay the opportunity costs of its actual choices without crying “sour grapes” – without denying that some real price was paid.

I think Jung was right about the need to come to terms with, and integrate what he called the “shadow.” I would go further, and describe at least some aspects of personality not as a simple quality or trait, but as a dialectic or polarization along an axis.

Thea: You remind me of that story by Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, about the man who wanted to get in touch with his shadow.

Guy: But Jekyll didn’t just get in touch with his shadow. He was consumed by it. That was the point of Stevenson’s parable, I think. It was certainly Jung’s point. The task is to befriend and domesticate one’s shadow, without letting it take over.

Typically, there are many areas of ambivalence in a personality. In principle, there is conflict whenever divergent suggestions prompt to different lines of thought or action. In a healthy personality, such conflicts are contained and constrained by some global context – a conception of oneself, complete with self-image and hopes and projects.

But, just as the apparent serenity of a meadow or forest glade conceals a Darwinian competition for survival, so the coherence of a relatively stable personality conceals a competition of cognitive “takes” and motor “impulses.” As we find everywhere, ecology and evolution are two sides of the same coin – ecology being the system of inter-relationship, while evolution is the principle of orderly, systemic change. Personality is the loosely stable structure that anchors and is manifested by the mind-system.

Thea: Fine, but obviously then, you need to say a whole lot more about that structure: How does a personality – your system of re-suggestive structures – form and stabilize? Having done so, how does it guide the

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individual moment by moment in coping with her world?

personality as a guidance system

Guy: Let me take your second question first. Once we're clear about the structures that are needed, it will be easier to see how they form.

The crucial work of personality, we can say, is to set a context for the reception, evaluation and uptake of suggestions from an environment – especially a social environment. In doing this, personality acts as a kind of filter, loosely analogous to the lens filters that photographers use to select the colors of light that enter their cameras. Your second question, then, amounts to this: What happens when suggestions from the outside world are met with evaluative suggestions superposed by the individual himself?

Thea: Well, what does happen?

Guy: The only way to answer that question in detail may be with engineered systems that simulate the workings of an actual brain – a feat that's certainly beyond us today. The principles of such a system are becoming clear, however. We've already discussed how the neural wetware of a brain functions as an adaptive system, and how in doing so, it tracks the world, learns from experience, forms concepts, retains memories, and sustains a personal consciousness. We have a general idea how the firing patterns that make this wonder possible might correspond to Allport's "psycho-physical systems" or to my re-suggestive structures. You may remember our image of the brain as a kind of radio receiver, sympathetically resonating to the suggestions it receives, and adaptively tracking its world in doing so.⁵

Thea: Yes, I remember. But it's a far cry from a resonating radio receiver to the dynamic, loosely stable structures of a human personality.

Guy: Not so far, perhaps, if we imagine the real-time resonance of this "radio" as expressively self-stimulating and re-entrant as much or more than it is externally driven – and as self-organized over-all into recurring patterns.

A simpler image – this time, from geology – occurred to me the other day. We might liken those re-suggestive structures of personality to the tectonic plates of volcanic rock that make up the

5 From Talks #4, 5 and 7.

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earth's crust. Then we can compare the evolution of personality over a lifetime to the very slow movement of those plates, now known to be responsible for continental drift, the rise of mountain ranges, and other geological changes.⁶ We might liken the interaction of re-suggestive structures to the drifting and grinding of these tectonic plates. Then we can imagine the re-suggestive structures building up in layers like igneous rock, each layer formed upon and supported by the layer beneath. And we can liken the unconscious to the core of molten rock, the magma, that spills over the earth's surface when its crust is broken.

Thea: What a tremendous image!

Guy: Dangerous to push it, obviously. But it may help us imagine how the re-suggestive structures of personality can evolve, like the geological features of a restless planet.

Thea: We use something like a volcano metaphor when we speak of a stressed individual who "blows his stack," but I've never heard the elements of personality compared to tectonic plates. It's apt, though, in suggesting how elements of personality shift and clash under the stress of life.

Guy: The crucial point is that personality is not to be confused with temperament – the physiological parameters and predispositions. Rather, we can imagine it as a layered – that is, tectonic – structure of suggestions that evolves on top of temperament, construed from the suggestions it is receiving.

Thea: The sticking point for me is that there must be some mind, some nucleus of self, already in place to do this construing. The idea of a mind that bootstraps itself out of a body's physiological potential is just inconceivable.

Guy: It isn't really, once some familiar ideas and fantasies get turned around. For example: Have you ever wondered why you are the person that you are, and no one else? As a child, I remember imagining that having the body I did, the family and childhood I did, the life history I did,

⁶ See <http://csmres.jmu.edu/geollab/Fichter/PlateTect/synopsis.html> for an introduction to geology and plate tectonics.

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was purely accidental.

Thea: Yes, certainly I've had that fantasy many times. And most of my clients have mentioned it. I think everyone, at one time or another, must have imagined she was a changeling – trapped in this life and body though destined for something else entirely. Buddhists believe that they earn the bodies and parenting they receive through good karma in previous lives. You're right: Those fantasies are very common. What of it?

structures of personality

Guy: Well, actually, it's just the other way around: You are who you are – have the particular self you do – just because you have this particular family and body and life history. You are conceived and born as a little animal with a human genome and body, but what we think of as our selves – our personalities – bootstrap themselves from the suggestions this little creature receives from its own body, and from the people and things that interact with that body. It's no coincidence that your self has landed in this body, with these parents, these circumstances and this particular life history. That self evolved to enjoy, suffer and cope with its particular situation. Given a different situation, it would have become a different self.

To say it once again, there is no metaphysical self that just happened to have landed in your body but might have been incarnated somewhere else. On the contrary. A zygote with a particular set of genes was conceived by particular parents at a particular time and place, and developed into a human foetus, waiting to be born. Within a few weeks of birth, that tiny creature had already begun to turn itself into a little human person with a mind of its own that gradually developed into the person and self you are today.

Thea: A Mind of Its Own . . . That sounds like the title of a novel. “Call me ‘Thea.’ I was conceived at an early age, and the resulting foetus gradually developed a mind of its own. It was a pretty good mind, though not an outstanding one. It was not especially brilliant or distinguished in any way, but it was mine – and as such, important to me. It got me around in my little world. It kept me out of trouble most of the time. It even kept me amused, when nothing much else was happening, as the subject of its own thoughts.”

Guy: Ah . . . You should write that novel some day. When you do, make sure your readers understand that although a potentially human organism

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got its start at the moment of conception, Thea-the-person only got started when she was welcomed and nurtured by other people in a human community. Even then, it took years before she was ready to function as a complete person amongst other persons.

You'd have to write something like this: "I was conceived at an early age, and gradually, in my little body, a mind developed – based on lots of suggestions from my genes and body and world. From the beginning, that nascent mind was very busy, evaluating all those suggestions and forming itself by taking some of them on board as re-suggestive structures while learning to reject others. At last, it could boast a full-blown personality, standing on its own cognitive feet, and presenting an adult face to the world."

Thea: You seem to regard personality as a sort of distillation or encapsulation of a life history lived in a given culture. Is that correct, or am I missing something? Usually, we think of culture the other way round, as a kind of field generated by the interaction of minds and personalities.

Guy: Whether you think of mind as internalized and personalized culture, or of culture as the collective interaction of many minds is a chicken-and-egg question with no right answer. Later, when we talk about culture, I will tell you that I prefer to think of culture at the personal level first; but that is a matter of intellectual convenience, and nothing more. It makes no more sense to think of human beings apart from their cultures than to think of termites without their elaborate tunnels or of spiders without their webs. The human children brought up by wolves turn out neither wolf nor human – unable to develop as normal humans after the acquisition windows for human sociability and language have closed. As Gibson said, the important question for you and your clients (once it can be assumed that the brain is working properly) is not what's in the mind, but what that mind is in. And, in every case, what it's in is a physical environment – including its own body, its family situation and society, and finally its whole life history. In the end, it makes little sense to consider a human mind and personality apart from some cultural matrix – the system of re-suggestive structures that gets taken on board.

Thea: OK. Now we're getting down to it. What does that system of re-suggestive structures look like, and how does it get built? What story can you tell about the development of personality?

Guy: Quite a good one, I think, but nothing very startling. This is to be

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expected, I'd say, as we've been watching and commenting on the development of human personalities for thousands of years. Parents, and the experts who advise them, have a pretty good idea how infants turn into children, and how children grow up.

However, this familiar story, as we'd tell it today, has at least one novel feature: The theory of self-organization suggests that we think of personality not as a pool of acquired traits but as a holarchy. What we call "personality" must have distinct levels of structure and sub-structure, each supported by levels beneath it and shaped contextually by levels above.

Thea: Why is that?

Guy: Remember that "edge of chaos" principle that we mentioned early on.⁷ A separation of levels seems to follow from the boot-strapping, re-entrant character of self-organizing systems, and from the competing requirement of such systems for stability and adaptability both. Separation of levels means that change can be confined to the highest levels of organization, while more basic levels are left relatively intact. It means that lower-level structures can be re-combined in novel ways to serve new functions with the same basic elements.

Thea: Yes, I do remember. How does this principle of holarchy and re-combination apply to personality development?

Guy: It suggests that we think about and describe personalities as built layer on layer out of recombinant patterns, and that we attempt to understand personality change as a re-combination of such patterns, evolving gradually under the selection pressures of an individual's life and life-choices.

Thea: What does this holarchical perspective do for the theory of personality development? Have you thought about this at all?

Guy: Yes, because personality development seemed crucial for the question I started with: the implications of the eD paradigm for the self-understanding of our species. It seemed clear from the beginning that the question of identity undergoes a sea-change: It is not so much "Who am I?" but "What am I?" – "What kind of system or thing?" One answer now seems clear: I am the personality that flourishes as best it can in this

7 In Talk #2.

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particular human body and life-world: I am that self-creating system – and what it imagines itself to be.

We start from the point just mentioned, that a personality – yours or mine or anyone’s – seems to grow in layers by processes of accretion and recombination. At its base is an affect level of “visceral” likes, dislikes and physiological responses which develop into what we call emotion – patterns of cognition, affect and affect display linked to triggering situations evolved through experience.⁸ The most basic of these patterns are formed early in life, and set a background for all that follows.

Thea: Very well. I have no problem with this. What’s next?

Guy: If we take the first level of personality to be comprised of learned emotive appraisal of situations based on temperament and its affects, then the second is comprised of all those familiarities, capabilities and specific skills that support not just our actions, but every intention and plan we entertain. For example, young children in our culture learn to drink from a cup, eat with a knife and fork, cross city streets, and hundreds or thousands of other elementary skills. In other cultures, the kit of basic skills can be entirely different. Most obviously, every normal toddler learns to speak a particular language or languages, in the dialect of its particular region and neighborhood, but in an individual way. This whole repertoire of basic skills amount to a second level of personality.

Thea: This I don’t see. What do skills like speaking English instead of Japanese or eating with a fork instead of chopsticks have to do with personality? They are aspects of what we call culture – not personality.

Guy: I believe culture and personality are more closely related than we tend to think. In fact, I am inclined to think of personality as a personal culture – or better, of culture as a collective standardizing of personality.⁹ It’s clear, in any case, that the specific competences and deficiencies of an individual both shape and set limits to what that individual can become.

A speech defect, inappropriate dress or grooming, poor table manners, and other skill deficiencies will set limits to an individual’s career and social destiny. Conversely, in Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*,¹⁰ two linguists teach a Cockney flower girl to

8 See Talk #7.

9 See Talk #12.

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pass as a duchess by refining her speech and manners. In learning to talk and move like a fine lady, her whole personality is changed. By the end of the play, she is neither one thing nor the other, but must invent a life to suit the hybrid she has become.

Thea: Speech therapy in the literal sense! Actually, you're right about this. We often find ourselves working with clients who don't have necessary social skills, or work skills to make satisfactory lives for themselves. To help them, we either have to teach them the skills, or coach them through the process of learning elsewhere. OK. What's your third level?

Guy: The re-suggestive structures of capability link up into broad areas of competence. With the right second-level inventory of skills, one can pass as a competent flower-girl – or a competent duchess. You can think of this third level as a social role or station in life.

Thea: Why treat that station as a separate level?

Guy: Because, like good holons, the second-level skills are recombinant. Many of the skills of a carpenter, will be found in the skill set of a locksmith or a plumber. Conversely, I have known very gifted people whose skills do not add up to any recognized competence whatever. Here as elsewhere, the whole is greater (or tragically less) than the sum of its parts. To occupy a social niche, it is not enough to have all the requisite skills. One must know how to apply those skills in relation to one another, and to the situational demands. Becoming a carpenter is more than gaining competence with all the tools of carpentry.

Thea: Yes, I can see that. A personal toolkit of skills is something more than a sum of particular skills; and it's the combination that makes a unique social actor. What next?

Guy: You've just said it. On a fourth level, the personality's skills and areas of competence are applied to the problem of drawing material and psychic sustenance from some particular social niche. A competent carpenter needs a specific job or contracts to turn his skills into a livelihood. This is the level that John Bowlby and his followers call the attachment system – an apt name, highlighting the ways in which a given

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individual is attached and anchored in his world – how he becomes, as you just said, a social actor.

Thea: Originally, Bowlby was just talking about the quality of the child's relation to her mother.

Guy: True, but the notion is completely general. The attachment system of a foetus is to its mother's womb, through the placenta and the umbilicus. The attachment system of an adult typically includes a job, a family, and a whole social milieu. The individual's attachment system evolves over the course of lifetime – sometimes gaining, but sometimes losing – gradually, or abruptly and catastrophically.

If all goes well, the individual's attachment system expands throughout youth into early and middle life, but then contracts in old age. As in the biosphere, this evolution is usually fairly gradual – with some abrupt transitions, often marked by rites of passage in which the individual's new status is strongly suggested to him by the elders and/or his new peers.

Thea: But surely, an attachment system is one thing; personality is another. Again, why mix the two concepts together?

Guy: Because they can be separated only through an over-rigid distinction between the individual and his environment. Remember Gibson's dictum: "Ask not what's inside your head, but what your head is inside of." The clothes you wear, the car you drive, the house you live in – are these aspects of your attachment system or your personality? What about your family, or your career or anything else in which you are significantly invested? I would say the attachment system must be treated as an aspect and expression of personality which, in turn, evolves to fit the attachment system as living creatures evolve to fit their ecological niche. It's a version of the Baldwin effect: The individual mind continues to learn and develop to fit situations that it has in part selected for itself.

Thea: You realize that none of the levels you've mentioned correspond to any familiar version of personality assessment? That of Jung, Myers Briggs, DSM IV – whatever?

Guy: Patience. We're getting there. The levels I've mentioned so far are foundational for the higher-level traits more usually thought of as personality. After the features we're born with – our genes and bodies, and

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the affective disposition that goes with them, they form a basis for traits of attitude and belief that make up the familiar personality types.

Thea: If that link could be demonstrated, it could be very interesting. We'd have the beginnings of a real theory of how personalities develop.

Guy: That's what I'm hoping. In any case, all those chronic attitudes, pre-dispositions and core beliefs comprise what I'd call the fifth and sixth levels of personality. The fifth level is that of habitual social orientation. Tendencies to be depressed, fearful, angry, exploitative, or whatever, are either matters of temperament or re-suggestive structures evolved and carried over from previous attachment systems. These are often thought of as assumptions we make about ourselves and other people; but might be better understood as recurring suggestions to feel, imagine, and act in specific ways. People do not so much believe crazy notions, as act habitually as if they believed them. This distinction is important because it allows us to account for the phenomena of akrasia, repression and willful ignorance without falling into confusion or paradox. Whereas, if we follow folk psychology in thinking of people's actions as driven by their beliefs, we are quickly forced to conclude that their beliefs are contradictory.

Thea: I see where you're going: It really makes no sense to say that an individual holds contradictory beliefs, while it makes perfect sense to say that she is driven by contradictory suggestions. Being driven by contradictory suggestions, she might easily act against what she thinks of as her "better" (albeit weaker) judgment; or she may block out unpleasant thoughts with more powerful safe ones. In our society, compulsive work, numbingly loud music and pornographic violence are commonly used in this way – as sources of pre-emptive suggestion, to provide comforting distraction from things we would prefer not to notice or think about.

Guy: Indeed, the sixth level of personality, an individual's trans-personal orientation (if he has one) toward life, nature and the cosmos as a whole may develop as a distraction of this kind – as a defense against personal relationships that are experienced as burdensome or intrusive. We often find such orientation in persons with a sense of "calling" or "mission" – in many religious people, but also in some complete secularists. Indeed, many artists and scientists and philosophers thoroughly hostile to religion share an outlook that is more cosmic than social.

Thea: Are you saying that the social and cosmic orientations preclude each other, and that one comes to the cosmic as an escape?

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Guy: No. I wouldn't say that strong cosmic orientation is always a defense against social demands and intrusive personal relationships – only that it can be used that way. Actually, I agree with a position I've heard you take: that human personalities mature from a preoccupation with the ego to a concern for society, and thence to some relationship with the cosmos and life as whole. My point is simply that a “cosmic level” (whatever we decide to call it) is worth considering in the theory of personality, where it will be found to stand in some relationship to the other levels.

Thea: In my work, we must do more than consider that level. We must often deal with the spiritual and religious dimension of our client's personalities, and with the family issues that may arise as a result. Often we encourage development of that level (in some version or other according to the client's own leanings) as a route to healing or re-integration.

Guy: Yes. That's one reason why I think you and your colleagues cannot afford to be indifferent to this new paradigm. Like it or not, issues and concepts that were formerly the province of shamans, mystics and theologians are now within the scope of science.

Thea: Yes, I'm beginning to see that. And I have to admit that your discussion of personality structure stirs my interest for its own sake. I like your geological metaphor of personality as a crust of re-suggestive structure built up in layers over a core of affect, sensation and impulse. You've got a lot of interesting theory here. Its direct clinical applications aren't obvious though.

Guy: That will be your department. I don't know enough about clinical work to say much. Suppose we began to think of ourselves as structures of the kind I've been describing. And seeing the development of each mind as a re-entrant, self-similar process – apt to get stuck, just as evolving species do, at some local “peak,” where a drastic personality change is needed, because no small change would be an improvement. For the psychotherapist, what would follow?

growth and change

Thea: I can only guess, as you admit that you are doing much of the time. So, all right, but let me start by saying that I have no idea what the consequence for therapists and their clients will be, and then make my best

guess.

Guy: In the true scientific spirit, you might add.

Thea: Yes. Push comes to shove, that's what science is, isn't it? Educated guesswork that can stand up against systematic criticism informed by systematically collected experience. You've taught me that. And I can see why you insist this is the best knowledge to be had. So all right then: Here's my guess:

To begin with, your story reinforces something we already know – that neurotic cognition and behavior is always adaptive in some way, and that our clients fear and resist the very personality changes they hope to achieve in therapy. The neurotic syndrome is self-protective – usually, in some crucial ways that our clients have good reason to be afraid of giving up.

Your story recasts this point in biological language: The traits and attitudes and behavior patterns that comprise a personality must hang together ecologically, like species in a biosphere. They must amount, somehow, to a life – however destructive, painful or impoverished.

Guy: Right. You can see the craziest pattern as a brain's best attempts to spin a coherent mind – a mind intelligible to itself, at least.

Thea: What follows for the therapist is that such patterns might be better understood as a dynamic balance amongst competing needs and impulses than as static “traits” of personality. They reflect a kind of homeostasis: Just as the human system monitors and adjusts itself to maintain an even temperature and blood chemistry, it also monitors and adjusts to regulate its cycles of arousal, release and relaxation, and to keep an emotional balance. Mothers learn to handle their babies with this cycle in mind. You want to give the infant lots of interesting stimulation while she is awake and eager for it; and you want to tire her out so she will sleep for a few hours between feedings – and let you get some sleep also. But you don't want the child over-tired, wound up and cranky before bed-time. You must help her to calm down, and allow herself to sleep at regular times, until it becomes a habit.

Your story and our experience suggest that this cycle of stimulation and relaxation continues throughout life, and that we learn to manage it by ourselves (or, most of us do) without mother's help. We use many tricks for doing so: One person listens to

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music. Another plays video games. A third sits around, munches on chips and watches television. A fourth has sex several times a day, with or without a partner. A fifth drinks addictively, and becomes “an alcoholic.” A sixth just sits around and takes a certain satisfaction feeling mistreated by life.

Guy: Very good. In eD language, we’d say each mind evolves to sustain a loose, dynamic equilibrium against the random jostling and change of its environment. We’d speak of tricks like those you mention as comprising a maintenance repertoire for the given individual. And we might speak of each instance of such a trick as a maintenance fix – as we speak of getting a drug fix, or a chocolate fix, or whatever. Then we would see drug addiction, for example, as a highly self-destructive maintenance fix, while my aikido and your volunteer work – on top of all you are already doing as a working woman and mother – would be more positive addictions, playing a similar role. Maintenance fixes are modes of re-creation, in the most literal sense. Everybody needs them, and has his own reliable favorites.

Thea: Actually, the phenomenon is quite familiar to therapists and physicians. We already speak of self-medication in just this way, for any thing a client uses to compensate for some personal deficit, or for the insults of life. Alcohol, compensatory eating, and gratuitous, inadequately provoked rage are typical examples. You are only generalizing the notion a little to cover hobbies and regular indulgences of all kinds. What does that get us?

Guy: Well, it might be useful to remember that addiction, and what you pejoratively call “self-medication,” are special cases of something more general. Our minds need to keep themselves on an even keel; and they acquire these little devices for doing so. This may help us understand not only self-destructive behaviors, but many other activities that become important to us although they serve no obvious practical purpose. Thus religious observance, of whatever kind, might be considered a “fix,” a very important one in many lives. So is any art or sport. So is my writing a fix, through which my mind self-organizes a little, with the help of a word-processing program and a laptop computer. Work *per se* can be a maintenance fix, apart from anything it achieves, or any income it brings. I am not mocking, you understand. Obviously, I think some of these activities are healthier or more productive than others, just as you do. I only point out the similar roles they play in our mental ecologies.

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Thea: Taking that perspective, the goal of therapy might be shifted a bit: It would become less a changing of character traits, and more a teaching of specific balancing skills . . . better ways to get pleasure and excitement, or to get comfort and calm. Less a talking cure (though talk with the therapist could easily be a part of it), and more a training to understand, accept and satisfy emotional needs in some more feasible and positive way. Since a lot of this work can be done in groups, it could be more economical than one-on-one therapy, as well.

Guy: You know what this reminds me of? All those spiritual practices from the East, like Yoga, or martial arts, or Zen. Alan Watts recognized these as forms of psychotherapy quite a long time ago . . . as Jung did too, for that matter. But mainstream psychotherapy has had little interest in integrating these approaches, so far as I know.

Thea: Several existing schools seem to go in that direction. Bioenergetics, play therapy and Morita are three that come to mind. But they are not mainstream – at least not here in North America – and I know little about them. They did not really catch here on for some reason. You think they should get another look?

Guy: I have heard those names, but little more about any of them. The general point would be that for personality change and development, whether in formal therapy or not, the learning of specific skills may be of greater long-term benefit than great insights or resolutions. The point that Shaw makes in *Pygmalion* – that it would be life-changing for a Cockney flower girl to learn to speak “proper” English – is a forerunner of this approach to personality.

Thea: Support groups of all kinds have sprung up – with or without professional guidance – and many of these have caught on. There is AA. There are gurus and sifus and senseis of all stripes teaching yoga and martial arts. Not to mention religious teaching and counseling of all kinds. But talking-cure therapists like me have not regarded them as colleagues, nor paid much attention to them as alternative modes of therapy. Perhaps we should look at them more closely.