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46 Dear Vera, Chuck, and Dave

Daniel Gilbert

I write these words two days before my 64th birthday, which the Beatles inadvertently defined as the beginning of old age. Boomers do not argue with the Beatles. Although I feel old enough to be a grandfather (which is presumably good news for my three grandchildren), I do not feel old enough to be a pillar of social psychology, or of anything else for that matter. A bit of Googling confirms that I am the second youngest contributor to this volume – the guy who sneaked in just before they slammed the door – so that feeling is not entirely unwarranted. It is an honor to be included in a book with the world's greatest living social psychologists, of course, but also a bit of a horror to realize that from here on out people will be asking more about my past than my present. “What are you studying these days?” is about to be replaced by “What was the world like when dinosaurs roamed?”

Oh well. Let it be.

I love writing but I hate writing about myself, and I turn down nearly all invitations to do so. The reason I agreed to tell the story of my long and winding road in this volume is that along its stretches I've had the privilege to know some *true* pillars, and this chapter is an excuse to tell you about them.

Phil Dick

Every love affair with psychology starts with a blind date. We all stumbled on it one way or another, usually by taking an introductory course in college. My blind date was blinder than most. I dropped out of high school at the age of 17. My friends and I bought a derelict 72-passenger school bus and drove it around the country, seeking truth, enlightenment, and high adventure, with emphasis on the high part. I got off the bus in 1975 in Denver, determined to become a science fiction writer because I was smitten with a woman who *was* a science fiction writer and shameless mimicry seemed like the best way to impress her. Which it did. For a short time. But more importantly, it made me realize that I loved writing. My stories included the requisite spaceships and aliens, of course, but their focus was always on humans – on their lives and hearts and minds. What would happen if a second-class citizen in a future racist

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society found a clever way to become the oppressor rather than the oppressed? What would happen if an intellectually disabled prisoner discovered a secret about the end of the world? What would happen if a robot who lusted after its owner was transformed into her human paramour – only to find true love with her computer? Those were the kinds of ideas I wanted to explore.

One day I sent a fan letter to my favorite author, Philip K. Dick. Remarkably, he wrote back. Then I wrote back and he wrote back and we corresponded for the rest of his too-short life. Phil read my early stories and offered encouragement, and in one of his letters, he wrote: “I predict that you will be a long-remembered author when the Game is finally over. Remember that you heard it from me. I want credit for having noticed.” *Me? A long-remembered author? Gosh, if Phil thinks I’m going to be a long-remembered author then I probably ought to publish something.*

And so I did, selling my stories to *Amazing Stories* and *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* and various other magazines and book anthologies. To sharpen my writing skills, I went downtown one day to enroll in a creative writing course at the local community-college. When I arrived, the woman at the registration desk regretted to inform me that the creative writing course was full, but did so anyway. Then she leafed through a big ledger and announced that there was one course in the same time slot that still had a few empty seats: Introduction to Psychology. I said yes – or more likely, why not?

Gary Stern and Carolyn Simmons

As first dates go, that course was just okay. Some of the material was interesting, but most of it wasn’t. I didn’t care about the stages of cognitive development, the location of the hippocampus, the symptoms of schizophrenia, or the mechanics of color vision. I wasn’t a baby or a brain surgeon, I wasn’t mentally ill, and my eyes worked just fine. On the other hand, that stuff about obedience and conformity, about helping and attitude change . . . now *that* was pretty cool. But the main thing I learned on that first date was that I loved school when adults weren’t forcing me to go and treating me like a child when I arrived. The bad thing about high school, I now realized, had been the high part.

A few community-college courses and one GED later, I was a full-time student at the University of Colorado at Denver, and I decided to investigate psychology a bit more. Which courses should I take? I noticed that the psychology department offered two courses that were both called “Social Psychology” but that were taught by different professors, and I reasoned that any area of psychology that warranted two courses must be twice as good as the other areas. So I signed up for both.

Best. Second. Date. Ever. It was the enlightenment I never found on the school bus. It was like seeing in color for the very first time. I sat in those courses, lecture after lecture, and thought, “Yes, *this*. This is it. These are the thoughts I’ve always wanted to think but didn’t have a name for. These are the ideas I’ve been exploring in fiction while social psychologists have been exploring them in fact. And they have a method

for getting real answers to all the hard questions I've been asking myself since high school – not the vague, hand-wavey pseudo-answers that philosophy and religion offered me, but clear, straight answers that stand up to scrutiny and don't require me to close one eye and have a little faith. These people *really* know who we are and how we got this way – and I want to be one of them."

Is it possible to feel like you're returning home when you've never been home before? Is it possible to be homeless your entire life and not know it until you walk through the front door? My professors in these courses were Gary Stern and Carolyn Simmons, and neither of them made much of a mark on psychology. But they made a mark on me. Like Phil Dick, they noticed. They took special interest when they didn't have to. Carolyn read my science fiction stories and hired me as her T.A. the next semester, and Gary let me work in his lab. When I decided to apply to graduate school a few years later, they both helped me – and were as surprised as I was when Princeton overlooked my missing high school diploma and accepted me despite my poor graduation skills.

Phil, Carolyn, Gary. The pillars you see stand on the pillars you don't.

Ned Jones

Everyone saw Edward Ellsworth Jones. When I arrived at Princeton in 1981, Ned was perhaps the most famous and well-respected social psychologist in the world. I didn't have the slightest idea who he was. I'd applied to Princeton because I'd heard of it, and I'd accepted their offer because they had nice housing. I'd never thought about what I'd actually do there, or with whom.

Ned was 55 years old when I arrived and looking to cure his habit of working with highly qualified, well-trained graduates of prestigious universities. At least that was my theory about why he chose me as his advisee without ever having spoken to me. From the moment we met, we got along famously. I thought he was brilliant and inscrutable, he thought I was brilliant and unvarnished, so he varnished me while I scrutinized him. Ned introduced me to one foundational idea in social psychology after another (most of them his own) ranging from attribution theory to strategic self-presentation. He would give me papers to read (most of them his own) and I would read them, type out long responses filled with questions and ideas, and leave those responses in his mailbox late at night. Once a week he'd call me into his office and we'd go through my responses. "This one is fine," he'd say, turning pages. "And this one too. And this one is clever, and this one might even be right." "Well, which should we work on?" I'd ask, and he'd reply, "None of them. Keep thinking."

So I did. Ned's papers referenced other papers which referenced other papers, so I sat in the library for a year and read them all. This may be hard for modern graduate students to fathom, but it never occurred to me to worry about my career. I assumed that someday I would probably publish something because that's what psychologists seemed to do, and someday I'd probably get a job because, after all, I'd need one, but I had no idea how either of those things happened, and anyway, they weren't

happening now, so I gave as much thought to them as a toddler does to puberty. Princeton seemed happy to pay me to read and talk to Ned, and Ned seemed happy about it too, so what wasn't to like? Ned sent me back to my office to "keep thinking" over and over again, and gaining his approval was the only progress I cared about making.

One day Ned called me in. "Now this one," he said, holding up one of my responses, "*this* is a good idea." Ned had taught me all about attribution theory, which described the rules by which rational people should make inferences about others. Ned was most interested in the cases in which people didn't follow those rules, and especially in the phenomenon he had discovered in 1967 and called the "observer bias," but that some sparky assistant professor named Lee Ross had recently rechristened "the Fundamental Attribution Error." Contrary to attribution theory's rational rules, people tended to attribute other people's behaviors to dispositions, even when those behaviors were clearly caused by situational constraints. Some psychologists had suggested that this was just an experimental artifact – that it happened simply because the experimenter had not made the situational constraints sufficiently salient. I suggested to Ned that we prove those psychologists wrong by designing a study in which the participants themselves *were* the situational constraints. It doesn't get more salient than that. Ned loved my idea about what we would come to call "perceiver-induced constraint," and reality loved it too because our studies worked (Gilbert & Jones, 1986). The editor at *JPSP* was last, but came to love it eventually.

Talking to Ned, reading, thinking, and publishing that paper – that's basically what I did with my four years of graduate school. When I went on the job market it was flush with good positions for newly minted social psychologists, but I got just two interviews, and just one offer. And that offer came my way only because the people who extended it – Janet Spence and Bill Swann at the University of Texas – were good friends with Ned and didn't want him to feel bad about his rather unpromising student. But a consolation prize is still a prize, so in 1985, I moved to Austin to find out what being pitied by Ned's friends might bring me.

Dan Wegner

It brought me a lot: mentoring and friendship from Bill Swann, kindness and support from a few other colleagues, and a very large department that thoroughly ignored me, leaving me to my bliss. That bliss was a group of graduate students who were barely younger than I was, and equally eager to do something big. What should it be?

Attribution theory dominated social psychology's intellectual agenda for more than a decade, but what I didn't quite realize during my time at Princeton was that interest in it had peaked and that a brand new something called "social cognition" was in ascendance – a "something" because it wasn't an idea or a theory like attribution theory was, or like cognitive dissonance theory had been before that, but rather, it was a new way of thinking about everything. Rather than studying what people did when

exposed to information, we could now study what they were *doing* with it. Using the techniques and metaphors of the new cognitive psychology, we could develop and test models of the underlying cognitive processes that gave rise to all the marvelous behavioral phenomena that previous generations of social psychologists had uncovered.

Building on the work of George Quattrone (a former student of Ned's), my students and I created a model of the cognitive processes that underlie attribution. We suggested that attributions were made in a sequence of steps, the first of which was unconscious and automatic and the second of which was conscious and controlled. The first step generated a dispositional inference and the second step corrected it with information about situational constraints. Because the second process was both later and more resource-intensive, it often failed to happen, resulting in – of all things – the Fundamental Attribution Error. This was psychology's first "correction model," and we tested it in a handful of experiments that produced a handful of papers, some of which went on to become the most cited papers ever published in *JPSP* (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Building on this work, I produced a more general model of belief that suggested that people automatically accept every proposition they mentally represent and then "unaccept" those that require it (Gilbert, 1991). Believing is first and easy, doubting is second and hard. This "Spinozan model" met with interest and continues to be the subject of research in psychology and neuroscience.

But of all the things that happened in Texas, the most consequential was meeting Dan Wegner, a social psychologist at Trinity University in San Antonio. Dan was, quite simply, the most clever, inventive, original, and hilarious human I had ever encountered. There was no close second. Dan taught me that science was not just a way to solve problems, but a way to experience and express wonder. And the writing! Psychology papers could be interesting, but until I read Dan's, I didn't know they could also be thrilling – as rapturous, wise, witty, and fun as the greatest American novel. Here was a man who had effortlessly combined my two separate passions: writing and science. I had no idea they could be one thing. It was like discovering that my wife and my lover were actually the same woman and that everything was right with the world after all.

I spent thousands of hours in Dan's company, learning to see psychology through his eyes. Dan was just starting his seminal research on thought suppression, and watching his ideas develop and his research unfold, I realized that I wanted to do what he did: I wanted to ask *original* questions and then answer them in ways that made others quiver with insight and clap with delight. Everyone told me that scientists weren't supposed to "write that way," but I didn't care what everyone thought. I only cared what Dan thought. Kurt Vonnegut once said that all writers have a specific person in mind when they write, and that everything they write is for that person. For Vonnegut, that person was his sister. For me, it was Dan Wegner. Every word I wrote from that time on – indeed, every word I am writing right now – was and is a continuing addendum to my lifelong letter to Dan.

Tim Wilson

Writing came naturally to me, but originality did not. It was 1990, I was five years past my PhD, and my research to that point had been an extension of George Quattrone's beautiful answer to Ned Jones's beautiful question. I wanted to make something beautiful of my own. So in 1991, I went to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto to spend a sabbatical year sitting by myself in a little room with a lovely view while trying to be original. It wasn't very productive. One day I got an email from a fellow social psychologist whom I'd briefly met at a conference, saying that by coincidence, he too was on sabbatical in Palo Alto, and that by coincidence, he too was sitting in a little room getting nothing done. Did I want to meet for lunch?

I don't remember exactly what Tim Wilson and I talked about that day. I just remember what talking to him was like. There are people who attack your ideas and people who applaud them, but Tim did both at once, poking a hole in whatever I said and then, before all the air leaked out, filling it with something fresh and interesting that I wouldn't have thought of myself. We talked and talked that year, and I came to realize that talking to Tim was what thinking would be like if only I were twice as smart. At the end of our sabbatical years, we both went home – me to Austin and Tim to Charlottesville – where I quickly discovered what it was like to have half a brain again. Um, what kind of flowers did Charlie send Algernon?

I also discovered what it was like to lose much of what matters to you. My beloved mentor Ned died prematurely, my marriage fell apart, my son dropped out of school, and one of my most important friendships bit the dust. I went to lunch one day with a friend and told him about these calamities. He asked how I was coping. I told him that much to my surprise, I was doing pretty well – not the best year of my life, but I was holding my own. He casually asked whether I could have predicted that reaction a year earlier – and suddenly, a light went on. Can people predict what will make them happy or unhappy? Do they know how long their happiness will last? If not, then why not? And why in the world hadn't psychologists answered this question – or even asked it? After all, people's predictions about happiness are the guiding stars by which they navigate through time. Shouldn't psychologists know whether those predictions are accurate?

After lunch, I hurried back to my office and called Tim. He was intrigued by this question too and offered to run a preliminary study to see if people made mistakes when predicting their emotional responses to future events. A few weeks later he called to tell me that his data were uninterpretable. But we couldn't stop talking about the idea itself, and eventually we tried another study, which worked, as did the one after that. Soon we had enough studies to write a paper on a new topic we called "affective forecasting." In that paper (Gilbert et al., 1998), we showed that people tend to overestimate the hedonic consequences of future events – a phenomenon we ultimately dubbed "the impact bias" – and that they do so for a variety of reasons, ranging from a failure to appreciate the power of rationalization to a failure to consider how other events will compete for their attention.

We didn't know that our first paper together would be cited nearly 2,000 times in the following years, or that it would lead to an explosion of research on affective forecasting that would span disciplines from law to medicine to behavioral economics. We didn't know that our mutual interests would expand to include the pleasures of uncertainty, the fear of being alone with one's thoughts, loss aversion and discounting, meta-memory, the dynamics of conversation, and more. We just knew that we loved working together and wanted to do it again.

In 1996, I moved to Harvard, and Tim and I kept collaborating. A quarter century later, we'd published sixty or so papers together, making ours one of the most enduring collaborations in the history of social psychology. When people ask us about its parameters – about the rules and roles and mutual agreements that governed it – we sheepishly admit that it's never come up. The fact is that we never *decided* to work together for a lifetime; we just started one day and forgot to stop. Asking what my career would have been like without Tim is like asking what my life would have been like if I'd been born to different parents. There isn't a meaningful answer to either question, and for that I'm truly grateful.

Tomorrow is the Question

I once wrote that the surest sign of progress in a scientific field is the presence of grumpy old people, grouching about the good old days (Gilbert, 1998). I wrote that when I was young. Now that I'm about to be a Beatle-certified elder, I can tell you that the good old days were good indeed. But not as good as these days, and not as good as the days to come. Ned was a legend in our field, but I suspect he never saw his name in a newspaper because in those good old days that inspire so much geriatric nostalgia, social psychology was a backwater. No one took us seriously and no one paid attention. Today our science is all over the news, all over television, all over the best-seller list, and its wisdom is eagerly sought by governments, institutions, and industries across the globe. Never have we been more relevant, recognized, or richly rewarded.

But making the main stage means that for the first time we have a target on our backs. No one attacked us in the good old days because we weren't worth the bullets. Success in any human enterprise creates jobs for critics, and because social media have given a megaphone to anyone with thumbs, it is all too easy to tune into the chatter and conclude that our field is under siege. A study didn't replicate so Denmark must be rotten! What happened in Dayton didn't happen in Dubai, so kill those babies and toss out their bathwater! Meh. Ignore the hum. Social psychology has a short history but a long past, and using science to study social life at the level at which people experience it is a human enterprise that's not going away anytime soon. Our field is constantly being re-invented, re-imagined, and improved – it was happening when I came into it, and it is happening as I ease out. But that's evolution, not revolution. Growing pains are not dying pains.

“Tomorrow is the Question” is a 1959 album by the great alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman, whose invention of free jazz and harmolodics reshaped American music. How did he come upon his ground-breaking ideas? Coleman once told an interviewer, “It was when I found out I could make mistakes that I knew I was on to something.” The critics derided his music as noise, but Coleman went on to win Grammys and Guggenheims, MacArthurs and Pulitzers, and more importantly, new generations of admiring musicians who continue to play his music, both experiencing and expressing its wonder. His critics are remembered by approximately no one.

Social psychology has made mistakes and should not be afraid to make more. It is, as far as anyone can tell, the only way to be on to something.

Coda

This chapter was supposed to be about me, and yet most of its sections bear the names of others. But isn’t that social psychology’s deepest message? Are we more than the sum of the people who teach us and touch us? The people who meet us in the “third place” that our conversations create and that neither of us can find on our own? The people who notice us, who take special interest, who read our stories and applications and articles – who overestimate our talents and in so doing, embarrass us into becoming the people they mistakenly think we are?

I’ve known such people in a life of happy accidents, a life spent thinking about the things that puzzle me in the warm company of fellow dreamers. Doing the garden and digging the weeds – who could ask for more?

Suggested Reading

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