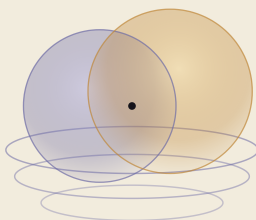


the On — —ing series



On Learning

*The Super Positioned Layers That Make Us a
Person*



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On Learning

The Super Positioned Layers That Make Us a Person

To my four favorite teachers of all time.

Mrs. Moulin (once Law and Government, now Psychology). Mrs. Wood (once Literature, now unknown). Mrs. Bierly (once Gifted Studies, now unknown). And Mr. Williams (Literature, who moved away to live the good life).

Mrs. Moulin taught me analytical and critical thought. Every step of the way, she was there to mold my mind into something like the one writing this lyric philosophy today. It's no wonder she got into child psychology late in life. Jung would almost certainly nod to her purpose in time. The importance of shaping a child's mind is priceless. May she forever shape the minds of the children around her to see the world the way I do. The future holds a special place for her in history. (She was Mrs. Byers when she shaped mine; she's Mrs. Moulin now. Same teacher, same eigenstate — observation just collapsed a new label onto her. The quantum lens holds, even here.)

Mrs. Wood taught me about ancient world literature — something far larger than the room we sat in. Something that always resonated with me through time. *Beowulf*. *The Canterbury Tales*. And with them, a simple but illogical understanding: that the text we were looking at hadn't been accurately transcribed. That didn't sit well with me. But it wasn't a bad thing. It's what caused me to look at the Bible with so much scrutiny. Also not a bad thing. Sooner or later I still found the answer. Oddly enough, it was in every book I ever read.

Mrs. Bierly taught me everything in between — critical thought, advanced history, problem solving, the beauty of the world seen through an analytical mind. She only ever let my mind expand, and checked me when my ego got in the way. A critical part of my development.

Mr. Williams. Where do I even start. If the music style Ska ever materialized as a person, it was Mr. Williams. He taught me more modern literature of the same resonance — *Animal Farm*, *Fear and Loathing*, 1984, to name a few. But he also showed me the band MxPx. That's a side story I don't have time for today; I'll likely tell it in another piece. For now, just remember that after I walked out of that classroom, I looked at authors like George Orwell, Hunter S. Thompson, Ayn Rand, Aldous Huxley, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. with the understanding that there was a far greater message in the words than in the paper they were printed on.

The point of this long dedication is this: the importance of learning is solidified through individuals like these. Not because they do it for the glory, the fame, or the money. They do it because they care about the future, and they know that future is built through the minds of children. Like I said in *On Growing*.

These teachers are the very reason my mind stayed as sharp as it did all through adulthood. I apologize to them for all the inexplicable moments my ego got in the way.

Don't tell a bright child he's special. That's the only lesson here, and I think modern society has already learned it. ♥

So, on learning.

What's the one thing you wanted to learn how to do, but never chose to spend the time learning? For me, it was the Rubik's Cube. I watched my cousins do it effortlessly — still listen to them brag about how they can do it today with ease — but I'd bet whatever was in my wallet they couldn't beat me right *now*.

One day recently, after moving in with my wife, around the time Covid and the *fear* of Covid took over the rational planet, I sat on the couch because there was nothing else to do. I put on a mask, went out into the disgusting disease-filled world (yeah, yeah), drove to Walmart, and bought the cube. Believe me, this was a stupid reason to leave the house for ten minutes when we didn't yet know how bad it was. But it kept me inside until we figured it out.

So I sat on the couch with an app, a YouTube video, an augmented-reality guide, and tried to find the mathematical pattern needed to get that six-sided cube — nine little squares to a face — back in order. My fingers, eyes, and brain worked together to figure out the layer-by-layer method: set the cross on one face, lock in its corners, fill the middle band, then crown the final face. One layer at a time. You build the thing the way anything worth holding together gets built — from the ground up, in order, each layer earning the next.

Simple. Right?

Of course it isn't. Neither is quantum physics. And I've always been of the school of thought that I could teach it to myself.

I did.

I didn't have to go to school to do it, either.

I fully understand the dual reality experienced by Schrödinger's feline friend. (Or I don't, you know? That's sort of the whole point — the cat is alive *and* dead until somebody opens the box. The knowing is what collapses it.) The

quantum lens again: a thing held in superposition until observation forces it to choose.

I did that.

Can anybody? Probably not — but that's not what I'm trying to ask with this piece. I'm trying to zoom back in, to the reason I *had* to learn. First, the cube. I needed something that would keep my brain busy enough to stay out of the mess, physically and mentally.

Someone wise told me that this isn't always the right answer — to ignore the mess. Sometimes we have to lean into the mess, if simply for the ability to help others who are stuck there. It's also best to be reminded of why we're there, through intent. Sometimes we see the mistakes others make under pressure, and know not to put ourselves through that later. Lessons come in all shapes and sizes.

While the world sorted itself out, I sorted that cube.

I learned how to do it.

Not fast, though. I'll always meet someone faster than me.

But not my cousins.

Who knows — maybe by the time they warm up to me enough to spark a competition, I'll have forgotten the skill I'd need to win.

That's another thing I wanted to get to. You *can* teach an old dog new tricks. Don't believe me? Look at me. Two or three bits of madness turned philosophy a day. All of it simple things, ideas, and lessons I've picked up over 42 years of being alive.

My jays — I don't know what they're doing, they're going nuts as my fingers cross the laptop keys. My wife sits beside me watching her favorite show. My headphones are in, music as loud as I can handle (Bob Marley meets electro house, that's all you need to know).

I guarantee that if I look to my right, my cat is staring dead at me. Completely relaxed, the way I told my wife the cat does when I write. Now, I'm not saying I'm a wizard, or that cats are aliens. I'm saying I was right.

A moment in time that makes sense. Being here with my family and my pets, letting my brain just move through time. Putting words to paper.

Wait —

The whole point of this piece was to learn. How silly of me to let the point of what I was trying to say escape me.

But maybe that's the parallel. Plato had Socrates argue, in the *Meno*, that we never really learn anything new — we recollect it, drawing out what the soul already knew. Anamnesis. The teacher doesn't pour knowledge in; she draws it out. (Every teacher named at the top of this page did exactly that.) And yet Locke insisted the mind starts as a blank slate, *tabula rasa*, written on entirely by experience. Both of them can't be right — and somehow, in the lived thing, both of them are. We arrive empty and arrive remembering.

We're born to learn. From the moment we're brought into this world, we learn. We learn to use our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our sense of touch (touch, but not yet grasp) — and all that information floods in a fraction of a second after we're cut off from the womb.

Imagine that. The innocent, untainted mind could learn the theory of relativity in relation to three waves the very second it becomes an actual person.

But when does it become a thought?

The moment of conception. I have to weigh in heavy here, and only touch it lightly. The subject of women's rights is not welcome in the modern theological world. But let me state this plainly: what's at stake is the greater good of humanity — something larger than the single question of bringing a child into the world under the unrelenting circumstances a mother could be facing.

I get it. I stand with women's rights until the day I die. I can provide, but I cannot choose. And in a small way, that explains the conversation I had with my

wife earlier today.

Something I wrote about in *On Forgiving*: sometimes it's hard for me to hear the simple thing my wife needs me to do in order to be happy. She's just telling me, put down your phone.

"I'm just planning our future —"

It doesn't matter. When the time comes to plan, the time will present itself. When the time comes to write, the time will present itself. (Note to self: set up quick voice notes on my phone. I'm missing grand material every time I walk outside my house.) And when the time comes to listen, it's because I need to learn.

Rilke told a young poet to be patient toward everything unresolved, to live the questions themselves. Ecclesiastes put it shorter: a time for everything. Boethius, writing from a prison cell, called philosophy itself a kind of remembering of what we'd lost the patience to see. They were all saying the same thing my wife said in four words. Today, she let me write. She's watching her favorite show, the dog is asleep somewhere near her feet, and the cat — decided it needed to elevate above me, the better to stare at me harder.

Cats talk to aliens. I promise.

My time is up. I have much to learn. My wife's show is probably coming to a close, and if it isn't, I need to move on anyway.

Never forget that every day is just another day to learn why we want to be alive. Be it science, math, beauty, God — it doesn't matter why.

What matters is that you look at the person next to you and remember they're learning too. In their own infinitely complicated way. They're just trying to explain to you how they feel.

Socrates said the only thing he truly knew was that he knew nothing. Aristotle said we become builders by building, and just by doing just acts — that we are what we repeatedly do. Put those two together and you get the whole of

it: stay humble enough to keep learning, and learn by doing it again and again, one layer at a time.

Imagine how much you'll hear — if you take your ego headphones off and listen.

And learn.

Resonances

echoes woven through the piece

C. G. Jung *the shaping of the young mind*

Individuation, and the teacher who molds a mind rather than walls it off.

Plato *Meno*

Anamnesis: we do not learn anew so much as recollect what the soul already knew.

John Locke *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Tabula rasa: the mind as a blank slate, written on entirely by experience.

Erwin Schrödinger *the cat*

Superposition — alive and dead until observed; the quantum lens, again.

Rainer Maria Rilke *Letters to a Young Poet*

Be patient toward the unresolved; live the questions themselves.

Ecclesiastes *3:1–8*

A time for everything — the same counsel, four words shorter.

Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy*

Philosophy as a remembering of what we'd lost the patience to see.

Socrates *Plato's Apology*

The one thing truly known: that he knew nothing.

Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics II*

We become builders by building — excellence as habit, one layer at a time.

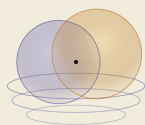


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*Two superpositioned spheres over the stacked layers that make a person —
built, like the cube, one layer at a time.*

JAMISON JOHNSON

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