

Seeking Wisdom

Better Behavior and Interpretations

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Any year that passes in which you don't destroy one of your best loved ideas is a wasted year.

Charlie Munger

Every so often, I think about my former self, and there's always at least one behavior or assumption that just makes me think: "How could I have been so stupid?". Of course, at the same time, I usually think that now I've got it mostly figured out, and I won't have a nasty surprise later—except that somehow, the same cycle repeats the next time. Sadly, it took me quite a few iterations to realize that I'm pretty much always doing something stupid; I just haven't figured out what it is yet. Clearly, the trick is to be self-aware enough to identify the current idiocy now rather than waiting to figure it out later! Given that the new year is upon us, I thought it might be helpful to review some of my own past mistakes, as it might be helpful to others.

Interpretations

For most of growing up and even into my early adult life, I assumed my behavior and language would be interpreted by others in a fairly specific manner. First, I assumed that those who did not know me would interpret me in a neutral or slightly negative manner. For example, if I were to say or do something rude, then these people would judge me to be a rude person. Perhaps more subtly, if I were to say something that could be interpreted negatively even when that wasn't my intention, then it would likely be interpreted in the more negative manner. This assumption still seems to make sense to me, as in my experience people do not tend to give the benefit of the doubt except to those that have shown they deserve it. So this first assumption seems to be fairly well founded at this point in my life.

For those that were close to me, it seemed logical to give them the benefit of the doubt and interpret them as positively as possible, and since this was my underlying belief, I assumed they would also interpret me in the same manner. Said another way, I assumed that those I was closest to would always interpret my behavior in the way that it was intended rather than the neutral or negative lens I assumed for strangers. This line of thinking seemed to make sense to me at the time, since they loved me, and shouldn't love include interpreting someone in the best possible manner?

Over time, I've realized that while this assumption is true to some extent, it doesn't always hold. As usual, reality is more nuanced—the interpretations I received depended on many factors, such as the type of relationship, the psychological health of the people involved, whether they were having a good day or a bad day, whether they were distracted, or even if they were in the dreaded 'hangry' state. Moreover, this faulty assumption resulted in some strange behavior on my part, in retrospect. For strangers or acquaintances, I put effort into interactions, trying to be careful of how I said things, how my behavior might be interpreted, and how my behavior might make them feel. For my loved ones, this effort did not seem necessary—why waste all that energy, since they would interpret me positively anyway? As some more extreme examples: if my best friend came up with a business idea that I didn't think was particularly good, I'd say that bluntly, similar to how I would think to myself. If my dad said something I didn't think

made sense, I'd argue until it was resolved—after all, I don't tolerate internal inconsistencies in myself, so why tolerate them with him?

The results of both the assumption and the resultant behavior are probably obvious to the reader at this point, but they were confusing for my younger self. Many times I hurt people's feelings without knowing why, or I would try to do something positive, only to be interpreted in a bewildering way. As I reflect now, I'm surprised at the extent to which this behavior was tolerated. The reality is that those I was closest to were more affected by and more sensitive to my unfiltered behavior than the strangers I tried to protect. Thus, while my loved ones probably did interpret me in a more positive way, I had reached the wrong conclusion—**more care and consideration should be taken for those you are closest to.**

Being Better

On interpretations, I believe even more that it is important to interpret loved ones as positively as possible—presumably those that are closest have earned that spot, and positive interpretations only make everyone's life easier and better. With regard to behavior, I think it is important to be kind to everyone, but doubly so for those that are closest.

On the broader point of rooting out poor behavior, I started with a Munger quote and finishing with his comments on destroying bad ideas seems fitting—to quote him yet again, “I have nothing to add.”

Well I've done so many dumb things that I'm very busy destroying bad ideas because I keep having them. So it's hard for me to just single out one from such a multitude. But I actually like it when I destroy a bad idea because...I think it's my duty to destroy old ideas. I know so many people whose main problem of life, is that the old ideas displace the entry of new ideas that are better. That is the absolute standard outcome in life. There's an old German folk saying...'We're too soon old and we're too late smart.' That's everybody's problem. And the reason we're too late smart is that the stupid ideas we...already have, we can't get rid of!...in most fields you want to get rid of your old ideas. And it's a good habit, and it gives you a big advantage in the competitive game of life since other people are so very bad at it. What happens is, as you spout ideas out, what you're doing is you're pounding them in. And so you get these ideas and then you start agitating and saying them and so forth. And of course, the person you're really convincing is you who already had the ideas. You're just pounding them in harder and harder...The price we pay for [not] being able to accept a new idea is just awesomely large. Indeed a lot of people die because they can't get new ideas through their head.

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