

Dynamic Self-Understanding: Pursuing Personal Excellence

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- [introductory greetings]

Dynamic Self Understanding: Pursuing Personal Excellence



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As I prepared this presentation my mind repeatedly returned to the work of Stephen Covey and his “7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” If you are already familiar with those ideas, you will recognize them as we proceed; if you have not heard them, you will not only be introduced to some exceptional advice from him, but I also highly recommend you

investigate him further.

Our topic is “Pursuing Personal Excellence” and so it is important to define excellence; I suggest we think of it as being of a superior quality – but this is always a moving goal. Though we need flexibility in life, we must also be able to envision and commit to this end in order for it to be a realistic possibility. So we will need to spend some of our time today on that, but before then we must first examine our own often unrecognized assumptions and perspectives.

As Covey explains, everything we do is embedded in our **worldview** – the way we see and interpret the world. This includes those things that we consider of most value. And there are lots of options: family, friends, learning, fame, wealth, or

power. Whichever we choose, whether we do it by default or intentionally, affects how we make decisions. If we prioritize money, we will in big and small ways look for how to become richer. If we prioritize family, we can end up acting in ways that we believe serve those people we love, but which undermine other things; for instance, we might choose to lie to get a brother out of trouble.

- *[around what is your life currently centred?]*

Covey proposes that the best way to structure our life is to centre it on principles – those stable qualities that give meaning and direction to the other aspects of life, including family, friends, learning, fame, wealth, or power. And I believe that the best way to think of these principles is as what ancient Greek philosophy identified and we have come to call the cardinal virtues – the foundational descriptors of good human living: prudence or wisdom, justice, fortitude or strength of will, and temperance or self-control. Along with what Christian tradition calls the theological virtues, and which other cultural and faith traditions call by other names (faith, hope, and charity or love), every good quality we have is some aspect of these seven. So excellence then fundamentally includes seeking to grow in these traits.

- *[what do you think about having a principle-centred life?
what changes would you need to make this happen?]*

Covey's first Habit is what he calls being proactive: this is to take intentional and creative responsibility for one's own life. It is to see yourself as the key agent for the decisions in your life. You are the primary author for what happens, as you make choices in response to opportunities and challenges around you. You are never a victim; you are always able to make change.

Some of you may be familiar with the English novelist of the mid 1800s and early 20th century, G.K. Chesterton. When faced with the question *What is wrong with the world?* he replied “I am.” By this, he did not mean to imply that he was the source of the tragedies and sufferings that have always been with us. But he was the only person for whom he had direct and ultimate responsibility. To focus on the changes that others should make is to distract us from what is before each of us. By doing our part, the only part we can do, we contribute to growth of virtue everywhere.

- *[do you really believe that you are the main author of the story of your life?]*

Being successful involves also understanding what is available to you in terms of your strengths and shortcomings, knowing what is reasonable within your abilities and where you might need to find alternate means. While today’s presentation does not allow for great depth on this topic, there is much to be gained through investigation of and reflection on your family of origin, the multiple cultures of which we are each a part, and those natural dispositions we call temperaments. Though none of these can fully define us, in practical terms, without greater energy and will, we tend to repeat those patterns that we have walked so many times before. But remember, it is always within our capability to create something new, even if we need to start small.

- *[what have you already learned about your strengths and weaknesses?
about your patterns of thinking and acting?
what do you think you should understand better?
where can you get this information?]*

Covey's second Habit is to begin with the end in mind. And for us this means further examination of what excellence means in each individual life. Growth in virtue may be a universally shared aspiration, but it is not the only goal to which we aim. Not only does each person have multiple important roles in life, but each day of each life also contains smaller and larger achievements within that 24 hours. Excellence requires identifying and planning for these. So it helps to remember that not only is today the first day of the rest of our lives (and we can begin whatever change we choose at any moment), it is also true that, until tomorrow, today is the last day of our lives and we need to take real responsibility for the finite nature of each moment.

Some of this involves examining the requirements that your life has set for you: what does it mean to be an excellent mother or a father? an excellent student? an excellent friend? an excellent professional? I believe that we are always in relationship, with each one of these interactions a chance to be even just a little bit better.

- *[what are the different roles in your life?
where do you want to grow in each?
how can you this?]*

But requirements are not the only place for us to search for excellence. There is also often within our hearts a passion that just needs some fanning to turn a spark into a flame. A motto in my professional work, whether therapy through **Vivens Counselling** (www.Vivens.org) or online education through **Vivens Academy** (www.VivensAcademy.thinkific.com), is *seeking life's fullness*. I am convinced that joy and potential are much, much more available to us than we realize – and so we usually settle for less. The joy and potential that are realized

when we pursue excellence require reflection, intentionality, and energy. Few people want to make this effort.

- *[what ideas really excite and inspire you?
what talents can you bring, especially to benefit the lives of others?]*

Covey's third Habit reminds us to set and hold to priorities; it says we need to put first things first. It is necessary to understand our worldview, the unique qualities that are part of who we are as individuals, the way virtues are present in our lives, the responsibilities and opportunities we have, and the ways in which we can make goodness, truth, and beauty more present in the world. But if we do not get this all in order and use our limited energy and time intelligently, we will not be very effective, or at least not as effective as we could be.

All of Covey's Habits work together. Being committed to prioritizing the use of our resources again requires intentionality. It means reflecting upon what could and is happening, and being willing to make worthwhile changes if needed. If excellence is worth pursuing, and I sincerely believe it is, then we need to have in place those practices that support it.

- *[how well do you use your time and energy?
could you reasonably use them better?
what would be the consequences if you did?]*

As we close the presentation I encourage you make this commitment. Not only will it benefit you, but your relationships and wider society will be made better. Though I have talked of Stephen Covey's work today, another major influence on my thinking is Viktor Frankl and his logotherapeutic approach. Frankl says the categorical imperative of logotherapy is: "So live as if you were living already for

the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now! ... Such a precept confronts [one] with life's *finiteness* as well as the *finality* of what he makes out of both his life and himself." This is to imagine yourself in the future, looking back at yourself now; from that perspective make the decisions now, take the actions now, speak the words now that you're then going to want to have made, taken, spoken.

● [when you imagine yourself in the future,
what do you think you will have wanted of yourself today?]

● [closing off]

- **9:00-9:05 am (MST)** ● Opening by the host and housekeeping (5 minutes) ● 4:00 – 4.05 pm (WAT)
- **9:05-9:10 am (MST)** ● Introduction of the session (5 minutes) ● 4:05 – 4:10 pm (WAT)
- **9:10-9:50 am (MST)** ● **Presentation by Wayne Ottenbreit (40 minutes)** ● 4:10 – 4:50 pm (WAT)
- **9:50-10:00 am (MST)** ● **Questions, Answers and Contributions from audience (10 minutes)** ● 4:50 – 5:00 pm (WAT)
- **10:00-10:20 am (MST)** ● Re-introduction of members/Induction of new members ● 5:00 – 5:20 pm (WAT) by Enitan
- **10:20-10:30 am (MST)** ● Address by Nigerian Chapter Lead (plans for the year and possible next steps) (10 minutes) ● 5:20 – 5:30 pm (WAT) by Dr Kemi Ogunyemi
- **10:30-10:45 am (MST)** ● Contributions from members (15 minutes) ● 5:30 – 5:45 pm (WAT)
- **1:45-10:50 am (MST)** ● Farewell and gratitude (5 minutes) ● 5:45 – 5:50 pm (WAT) by Ruqayyah



If by Rudyard Kipling

IF YOU CAN keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

IF YOU CAN dream- -and not make dreams your master;
If you can think- -and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools;

IF YOU CAN make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings,
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on! '

IF YOU CAN talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings- -nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And- -which is more- -you'll be a Man, my son!