

# The Paradox of Intelligence

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When I was a kid, I believed that being smart was what mattered. That's how I was raised, and that's how the world responded to me. As a disturbed fat kid with a speech impediment (stammering) who was neither particularly handsome nor athletically gifted, my intelligence was what made me special. That's what the world told me, that being smart was my most significant endowment, effectively my sole resource.

By "intelligence," I mean the classic definition: the ability to learn or understand primarily through the skilled use of reason — otherwise known as IQ. Although I envied those who were physically more beautiful and comely or who came from wealthier families, I took refuge in the belief that, in America, intelligence was what mattered. At least, that's what I was told. Being smart was my ticket to the ball, and I punched it.

This was in the 1950s, when we Boomers were children, the middle class was expanding, and white flight to the suburbs from decaying inner cities (in my case, St. Louis, Missouri) was fully underway. The tax base was burgeoning; with each new suburban housing development, new schools popped up like mushrooms. Hell, they couldn't build schools fast enough. In the twelve years of my elementary and high school education, I inaugurated nine brand new schools. It got almost boring. Another year, another new school. Yawn.

Somewhere around second or perhaps third grade, my suburban public school district began administering the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Results of those tests were used to academically organize and segregate the students within my graduating class of 700 all-white kids (except for one native-born Japanese-American). The smart ones were all grouped together, as were the average students and the dumber kids. By the time I was in fifth grade, I was always in one of two classes with the same 60 kids. We were the academically gifted high achievers, the top 10%. And it stayed like that all through high school. Although my school system tried to keep this de facto pecking order scheme as low-key as possible, almost under wraps, we all knew who was who. There would be no tech-school training as mechanics or brick-laying wage jobs for us. We were the smart ones, groomed for college as the future leaders of the culture.

Each year when we got back the scores of our Iowa Basic Skills test, anyone in my class whose assessment scores weren't all in the 99th percentile felt chagrined. Beyond that, we knew that our IQs had also been measured and quantified. In high school, one of my more intrepid classmates light-fingered a copy of our IQ results from the head office. My IQ of 138 didn't make me the smartest kid in class, but I was securely among the chosen elites. The pinnacle of my academic career came when, surprisingly, I did well on the PSATs and became a National Merit Finalist. From that high water mark at the young age of 17, it has been all downhill. Starting when I entered college in 1967, I began to realize that intelligence — rational smarts as measured by IQ or academic performance — wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

The first domino to fall was the idea of America as a classless society based on merit. That turned out to be a crock. Intelligence may have mattered, but not nearly as much as wealth and race. On top of that, it became obvious to me that, in America for sure and probably elsewhere, looking good was more important than actually being good. What a disappointment.

Even more importantly, I realized over the years that IQ, academic achievement, and success in the world simply did not correlate with values that mattered to me. The older I got, the more I saw that being smart didn't necessarily make anyone more compassionate, wiser, morally upstanding, or mature. Although I'm fallible and cannot offer much of anything as objective or capital-T "truth," I can assert in my elder hood the firm belief that "intelligence" doesn't correspond to any other worthwhile quality. One can be smart as a whip and yet be a total asshole. Conversely, one can be not very smart in terms of IQ, yet still be a wonderful human being. There's simply no connection at all between rational intelligence and humanity. In my darker moments, I wonder if there might even be a negative correspondence.

This revelation is among the great disillusionments of my life. By comparison, learning that low-fat diets are terrible for health and weight maintenance is also a disillusionment, but that revelation can't hold a candle to realizing that being smart doesn't foster any other goodness. Sure, it may be disappointing to discover that something one once believed as a basic truism was, in fact, a pile of crap, but that's a necessary part of giving up our illusions or self-deceptions in favor of accepting and embracing reality.

The list of assumptions or beliefs that I've had to give up is as long as my arm. And every year adds a couple more "Ah-Ha!" course corrections. That's not to suggest that the process is getting easier. No, my cherished beliefs — whatever they may be — tend to persevere and, when revealed to me as illusions, still die hard. Neural pathways, especially in the limbic pain, are quite persistent. But examining personal beliefs and correcting them as necessary seems to be much of what inner work is about.

Then there's the undeniable fact that so little in life can be judged as inherently good or bad. Take astrology, a system I've used to earn my modest livelihood for the past half century. As a former smart kid who walked away from the world of intellectual academics and wandered off into the woolier realms of spirituality and metaphysics, I am often aggravated to the point of insult by the knee-jerk rejection of my discipline by people who don't know a damned thing about it. For them, my being an astrologer totally invalidates me in their eyes. My thoughts and opinions about politics or science or social activism must be looney-tunes. On the other hand, being an astrologer instantly endears me to certain other demographics of people whose fervent but sometimes not very thoughtful belief in astrology or new age metaphysics is less than thrilling to me. These people see me as a kindred spirit, but I'm not. The last thing I want to be is a card-carrying member of their magical-thinking clubs. (I'm skilled in the language and narratives of metaphysics, and fine both valuable. I just regard them as metaphor and poetry more than fact.)

So, I have to work in two quite opposite directions: First, I try to calmly ignore the dogma of intellectual snobbery so common in mainstream institutions. Second, I strive to be compassionate toward those I regard as babies on both sides. My success in these endeavors varies wildly, of course, and I inevitably end up having to turn the spotlight back on myself. Have I actually transcended my early belief in the superiority of intellect, or have I merely cloaked it differently and hidden it away? Have I actually transcended the narcissism of self-praise and self-blame for a more graceful humility, or am I kidding myself?

And so it goes. The inner work continues. At this point, I acknowledge that I will probably always like and gravitate toward "smart" people more than not very smart people. That's a given in my case, and I don't seem able to change it. But it's clear as a bell to me that intellect alone, isolated from a larger and more mature understanding of life, will never be enough.

Intelligence matters, but many forms of intelligence exist, of which rational intellect is only one. Thinking clearly is critical, but it requires a lot more than just a high IQ. Finally, the path toward becoming a fully human being remains quite mysterious, in part because there are as many roads as there are people. We use whatever we're given, and we add to it as much as we can.