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Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about how drawing is an immersive and a meditative process and how it helps him see a situation with a lot of nuance and accuracy.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Tom, moving along, you speak about your experiences with learning drawing and appreciating the art of observing what is without being biased by patterns or objects that we look for? You know, what can we learn about the way artists see the world in the context of being fully present and just focus on what is rather than preset patterns that our mind my gravitate towards?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): Yeah, it is a very good point and going into... drawing was something I had wanted to pick up for a long time, I had dabbled just a tiny bit. Of course, as a child like many children I had done a fair bit of drawing and sort of walked away from it. So, when I tried to return to it at age my mid-40s, of course the first drawing I produced was essentially frozen in amber time capsule of the last drawing I had worked on as a child. So, my drawing had not progressed at all but that's just one point I want to make. But the thing going into drawing I sort of in my mind I thought the whole process was more mystical and more about holding the pencil a certain way and really training your arm to do this certain thing and when really the whole process as I began to learn it was simply about looking at the world in a new way and what happens is I took this course based on a very famous book called Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by a woman named Betty Edwards and this is a very famous book that has probably taught more people how to draw in the world than anything. So, I took a one-week seminar here and the first thing you are asked to do is draw a self-portrait, I mean, within the first 10 minutes you are asked to draw a self-portrait. This is terrifying because I haven't drawn something in a long time and the results were pretty poor as you might imagine, but more than just poor it just didn't look like me and it didn't really look like a human and the problem was is that we sort of when we try to reproduce a human face on paper we bring in as you mentioned this set of symbols, like we think we know what eyes look like, we think we know what a mouth looks like, we think we know where the eyes sit in relation to the forehead or the jaw. All these things are based on some sort of internal cognitive calculus that we make that turn out to be wrong when tried to put in a two-dimensional form on paper. So, the whole... drawing really was for me was sort of breaking down those preconceptions and learning to look at what was actually out in front of me in the world. So, for example, when we are asked to draw a chair, I have this if you like a better word sense of chairness in my head, the way I thought a chair looked and when the teacher came over to you and sort of say well, your proportions look a bit wrong here and to my mind it looked perfect like the perfect platonic chair, this ideal chair, but indeed when I measured the chair, I was trying to draw I had got it completely wrong. And it was just such a striking moment

where how could my own senses fool me to such a, you know, there have been a lot of interesting books about cognitive biases and illusions and psychology but here it was sort of brought very close to home to me when I... so it's really just sort of a slow process of unpacking these conceptions, trying to get them out of your head and look at the world in a new sort of granularity, looking for the texture of things, not the category of objects that they belong to and so yeah, it was... and by the end of the week we were asked to make another self-portrait and the entire class had such an amazing improvement in this regard, it was quite striking to me, you know, we learned quite a bit and a lot of it didn't really have to do with moving our pencil in any special way, it was just again trying to just look at the world in a new way. So, I am not sure what the larger metaphor here is, I think, there's an idea that we live much of our lives habitually where there's a lot of stuff the brain screens out as we move around in the world because we are trying to conserve our resources or simply get through the world. But you know stopping to take time to look at the way things really are can be a very instructive exercise, I think. And I will just say in terms of focus and fluid elements like that there's nothing I have done in the last decades that I can think of that compares to drawing in this regard, that I would lose track of time and four or five hours would pass and I would still be sort of deep into this deep into this drawing, you know, in this age of endless distraction and short attention spans that I found that a very powerful and sort of cleansing exercise.

DJ: And what about and I am curious, I am pretty hopeless when it comes to drawing but I am curious what about learning drawing or doing the drawing makes it, you know, makes you lose track of time? Is there anything about it which leads to this kind of a phenomenon?

Tom: I would say just that sense of deep concentration really, you know, once you start to look at the way things really are and I don't want to sound too grandiose here, but I mean I was looking in the corners of rooms trying to depict a shadow and then suddenly realizing the shadow itself had four or five other shadows. And so you begin thinking it's going to be a very short process but the longer you look the more there is to see and that I think is where you begin to lose track of time because you simply are unlocking all these doors and plunging more deeply and then just again being in this state of just perfect, a flow where you are completely intent on capturing this moment that sort of a different timescale takes over and yeah, so I don't think there are many opportunities, you know, there are certain other activities I am sure where these certain states like that can be reached. To me not having done meditation I sort of imagined was what meditation might feel like when practiced at its highest capabilities, but it was meditation for me with a purpose where I had something to document at that moment that I could sort of leave the room with, which is also very satisfying.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Seeing things, the way they are and appreciating the nuances is quite an art. This comes through in the way we read a situation and the depth to which we pick up the nuances. One of the earlier guests in the podcast was R Gopalakrishnan (RG), who has written several books, one of them being, how leaders in new companies often CRASH, where he has profiled several leaders who were brought in with a lot of fanfare but didn't settle in well. When I asked him about how leaders should think about Efficiency and Effectiveness, he used the metaphor of music and said something like what Tom says in the context of drawing.

RG: "You know, this is like music, it has multiple layers and if you are a discriminating person, you can feel the layers, So, yours is one such layer, I am not disputing it, it is an obvious one which you have picked up, but I have something different in mind. I have tried this very often in Tata management

training centres and other places where I might have given a talk in the past. I will ask the question do you think a top leader must be more focused on effective or efficiency and many of the people think they are the same thing, many of the people think what's the difference. Then a shootout happens, conversational shootout where they say that at the very least you must be efficient, if you are not efficient where the question of being effective is? And then this sort of deteriorates into semantics between efficiency and effectiveness. So, in order to get a clearer decision on this you started using a metaphor which I have alluded to in one of my books. If I put a pot of honey and ask a bee, if I could speak to the bee, to get to the pot of honey, he goes round and round in circles before he alights on the honey. If I ask a human being he will just get up, turn his head and walk straight. The human being is efficient. The bee is effective. Now it's to do with the anatomy of the bee and I don't want to get into that discussion in the interest of time, but the anatomy of the bee doesn't allow him to be efficient and therefore he has to go round and round in circles before he alights on the honey which he desperately wants as much as the human being. Take a second example since most of us don't spend our time watching bees getting into pots of honey. How does water flow down a mountain's slope, never in a straight line unless you are sitting at Niagara Falls which is not a mountain slope anyway? It goes... it takes the contours of the mountain under gravity to find its way down. It is seeking to be effective. Efficiency demands that the water droplet fall straight down vertically right but it will hit obstacles and hurdles. Think of how blood flows in your veins? It's not in a straight line, it's in waves, and that's why when our ECG is taken if you switch on the monitor it will go [making a sound] if you heard your own ECG. So the law of nature is that things move in spirals and circles and not in straight lines and to me that became a very effective way of communicating to people there's a huge difference between effectiveness and efficiency and then I found very interesting ramifications because people the group would say, you know, that's why our company goes around in circles before taking the decision and it doesn't matter which company or what we are talking about, it never takes a decision in a straight line, it goes to that committee that committee that committee it goes around in circles, and then finally the capital proposal is approved and the acquisition is approved and that metaphor I am using to explain your... I mean, I... since I have written some book on this I can go on and on forever, I should not do that. But there's a huge difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Now coming back to the question of the board, the board is looking for effectiveness not at the expense of efficiency but if they have to, they would rather err on the side of effectiveness than efficiency. Like Covid is going on now, of course, I want efficiency, I want cost to be controlled but I want effectiveness, I don't want dead bodies lying all over the factory or the head office building."

DJ: Like Tom says, there are layers and layers in most situations and the more nuanced we are in the way we read the layers, greater our effectiveness in complex situations.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from R Gopalakrishnan that is referenced: [Solving for efficiency versus effectiveness](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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