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Introduction

A dictionary is a guide to language. This is a dictionary for the distinctive language that the School of Life ‘speaks’, which is that of emotions. It is a selection of words and phrases that sheds light on our feelings about ourselves, other people and the workings of the modern world.

Too often, we’re left fighting for a way to explain our emotional intentions; this dictionary is a tool to help us convey our meanings with economy and precision.

The School of Life is an organisation with a simple mission: to increase the amount of Emotional Intelligence in circulation. We seek more emotionally intelligent kinds of relationships, workplaces, economies and culture.

What structures our thinking – found in the dictionary entries in the pages ahead – are eight central themes, which unfold as follows:

1. Self-Knowledge

Socrates, the earliest and greatest of philosophers, summed up the purpose of philosophy in one resonant phrase: ‘know yourself’. A capacity for self-knowledge is at the heart of our inclinations to forgiveness, kindness, creativity and wise decision-making, especially around love and work. Unfortunately, knowing ourselves is the (always unfinished) task of a lifetime. We are permanently elusive and mysterious to ourselves. We have to catch our real intentions and feelings obliquely, with some of the patience of a lepidopterist.

One of the tasks of culture is to offer us tools to assist us with the task of self-knowledge. We need a vocabulary to name feelings and states of mind; we need encouragement to

be alone with ourselves at regular moments; we need friends and professionals who will listen to us with editorial precision and sympathy, and we need works of art that can illuminate elusive aspects of our psyches.

Above all, we need to be modest about our capacity easily to understand who we are and what we want. We should nurture a stance of scepticism towards many of our first impulses and beliefs and submit all our significant plans to extensive rational cross-examination.

Failures of self-knowledge lie behind some of our gravest individual and collective disasters.

2. Other People

Having to live around other people can severely challenge any desire to remain calm, kind and good. The School of Life takes seriously the ambition of being polite and nice, despite the lack of prestige that surrounds these concepts and the constant frictions and misunderstandings that attend communal life.

At The School of Life, we also know that kindness is a skill that has to be learnt – and that we must put unexpectedly intense energy into the task of overcoming our first responses to other people, which often veer (quite understandably) towards rage, paranoia and defensiveness.

Two manoeuvres stand out. We must expect less of people – not in order to do an injustice to them, but so as to be readier to forgive and accept problems when they arise. And we must learn to see that bad behaviour almost always stems not from evil but from pain and anxiety. We need to direct sympathy and imagination towards a very unfamiliar target: those who frustrate us most.

K

† Kintsugi

Kin = golden
tsugi = joinery

The origins of Kintsugi are said to date to the Muromachi period, when the Shogun of Japan, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), broke his favourite tea bowl. Distraught, he sent it to be repaired in China. On its return, he was horrified by the ugly metal staples that had been used to join the broken pieces, and charged his craftsmen with devising a more appropriate solution. What they came up with was a method that didn't disguise the damage, but made something honestly artful out of it.

Kintsugi belongs to the Zen ideals of *wabi-sabi*, which cherishes what is simple, unpretentious and aged – especially if it has a rustic or weathered quality. A story is told of one of the great proponents of wabi-sabi, Sen no Rikyū (1522–1599). On a journey through southern Japan, he was invited to a dinner by a host who thought he would be impressed by an elaborate and expensive antique tea jar that he had bought from China. But Rikyū didn't even seem to notice this item and instead spent his time chatting and admiring a branch swaying in the breeze outside. In despair at this lack of interest, once Rikyū had left, the devastated host smashed the jar to pieces and retired to his room. But the other guests more wisely gathered the fragments and stuck them together through kintsugi. When Rikyū next came to visit, the philosopher turned to the



K

Tea bowl, porcelain with gold lacquer repairs, early 17th century. The aesthetic of Kintsugi lends reverence to the damaged and imperfect – a principle we could usefully employ in our own lives.

repaired jar and, with a knowing smile, exclaimed: ‘Now it is magnificent’.

In an age that worships youth, perfection and the new, the art of kintsugi retains a particular wisdom – as applicable to our own lives as to a broken teacup. The care and love expended on the shattered pots should lend us the confidence to respect what is damaged and scarred, vulnerable and imperfect – starting with ourselves and those around us.

See also: Appreciation; Jolliness; Love as Generosity; Splitting and Integration.



¶ Listening as Editing

One of the kindest, most helpful and most interesting things we can ever do with another person is to listen to them well. But good listening doesn't just involve paying attention to what someone is saying. There's a far more active side to the listening process that could properly be described as 'editing'; in key ways, it is similar to the work done for an author by an ideal literary editor.

Classically, a good editor doesn't merely accept a manuscript as it is first presented. They set about interrogating, cutting, expanding and focusing the text – not in the name of changing the fundamentals of what the author is saying, but of bringing out a range of underlying intentions that have been threatened by digressions, hesitations, losses of confidence and lapses of attention. The editor doesn't change the author into someone else; they help them to become who they really are.

The same process is at work with a good listener. They too know that some of what a speaker is saying doesn't accurately reflect what they truly mean. Perhaps they want to touch on a sensitive, sad point, but are frightened of being too heavy or of imposing. Maybe the speaker wants to pin down why something was beautiful or exciting, but get bogged down in details, repetitions or subplots. There might be an emotional truth they are trying to express, but the quality of their insight is undermined by the feeling that it would be more normal and safer to stick to factual details.

A good editorially minded listener knows how gently to correct these tendencies. They will in the kindest way possible

ask the speaker to unpack their feelings more intensely and elaborate upon emotions with a sense that these will prove hugely interesting rather than boring or alarming to the audience. They help the speaker to close down stray subplots, and nudge them back to the central story, which has been lost in details. When the speaker gets tongue-tied from fear, the good editor-listener is on hand with reassurance and encouragement. They know how to signal an open mind and hint at a welcome berth for all manner of unusual-sounding but important confessions.

The good editor-listener will be responsible for a lot of changes in a conversation. Were it to be transcribed and manually edited, there would be red pencil marks everywhere across the text. But the result of such deft interventions is never a sense of violation, but an impression of having been brought closer to one's real intentions.

An ideal editor-listener helps us to be more ourselves than we know how to be by ourselves.

See also: Love as Generosity; Warmth.

¶ Loneliness

Loneliness is the fundamental condition of humankind. This fact is heavily denied by Romantic culture, which promises us that there are in fact a few people who will be able to understand us fully – a fairy tale that causes us untold difficulty.

A high degree of loneliness is an inexorable part of being a sensitive, intelligent human. It is a built-in feature of a complex existence. We must all die alone, which really means that our pain is for us alone to endure. Others can throw us words of encouragement, but in every life we are out on the ocean drowning in the swell while others, even the nice ones, stand on the shore, waving good-naturedly.

L

It is unlikely that we will ever find someone on exactly the same page of the soul as us: we will long for utter congruity, but there will be constant dissonance because we appeared on the earth at different times, are the product of different experiences, and are not made of quite the same fabric.

The problem is sure to get worse the more thoughtful and perceptive we are. There will simply be fewer people like us around. Acute loneliness is a specially punitive tax we have to pay to atone for a certain complexity of mind.

At an exasperated moment, near the end of his life, the German writer Goethe, who appeared to have had a lot of friends, exploded bitterly: ‘No one has ever properly understood me, I have never fully understood anyone; and no one understands anyone else.’

It was a helpful outburst from a great man. It isn’t our fault: a degree of distance and mutual incomprehension is not a sign that life has gone wrong; it’s what we should expect from the very start. And when we do, benefits may flow. The history of art is the record of people who couldn’t find anyone in the vicinity to talk to. We can take up the coded offer of intimacy in the words of a Roman poet who died in 10 BCE or the lyrics of a singer who described just our blues in a recording from Nashville in 1963.

Loneliness makes us more capable of true intimacy if better opportunities ever come along. It heightens the conversations we have with ourselves; it gives us a character. We don’t repeat what everyone else thinks. We develop a point of view. We might be isolated for now, but we’ll be capable of far closer, more interesting bonds with anyone we do eventually locate.

Loneliness renders us elegant and strangely alluring. It suggests there is more about us to understand than the normal patterns of social intercourse can accommodate – which is something to take pride in. A sense of isolation truly is – as we suspect but usually prevent ourselves from feeling from fear of arrogance – a sign of depth. When we admit our loneliness,

we are signing up to a club that includes the people we know from the paintings of Edward Hopper, the poems of Baudelaire and the songs of Leonard Cohen.

Lonely, we enter a long and grand tradition; we find ourselves (surprisingly) in great company.

See also: Normality; Oral Sex; Psychological Asymmetry; Sane Insanity; Warmth.

¶ Long-Term Love

Much of our collective thinking about love targets the problems we face around starting a relationship. To the Romantic, love essentially means ‘finding love’. What we blithely call a love story is mostly in fact the start of a love story.

Yet the true, heroic challenges of love are concerned with how to keep love going over the long term, in the face of hurdles not generally discussed in art and, as a result, lacking glamour: incompatible work schedules, differing ideas about bathroom etiquette, phone calls with ex-partners, waning lust, the demands of household management, business trips that clash with anniversaries, the question of whether and when to have children, divergent parenting styles, problematic in-laws and economic stresses.

To negotiate these challenges, long-term love requires us to develop a host of skills that our societies tend to stay quiet about: forgiveness, charity, humour, imagination and seeing the other as a loveable idiot (rather than simply a disappointment). To love over time involves striving to understand what another person is really trying to say when they are upset, even if what they are uttering is on the surface shockingly disdainful. It might involve discovering the dignity of domestic chores or a melancholy acceptance that a good relationship might require the sacrifice of certain dreams of sexual fulfilment.

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