

Success full?

On potential, and its anxieties



Peter Geyer

*You can tell a man who'll never fulfil
his potential by the way he pours sugar
in his coffee*

*You can tell a woman who'll never fulfil
her potential by the way she parks
her friend's car*

Kip Hanrahan

*If you see her out tonight
And she tells you it's just the lights that
bring her here, and not her loneliness
Don't give up, 'cause sometimes she
forgets*

Steve Earle

*I write you love songs on hotel notepads
I bear my feelings and you read
between the lines
How many times have you lost my
meaning?*

Tony Colton 1973

*I don't know anything about music.
In my line, you don't have to.*

Elvis Presley

What is **potential**?

Is it an advertisement where the world of music opens up for a child at a grand piano? Is it talent, or genius, requiring years to develop, no matter the inherent gifts, as Michael Howe suggests (1999)? Does the child get a choice, whatever that means?

Or is it about fame, celebrity, accolades (welcome or not), and the money required to get there? Grand pianos don't come cheap, nor do lessons. Perhaps family bankruptcy is a prerequisite, if the money dries up before the potential (as defined) is realised.

Elvis Presley's family became acquainted with money after his success, and there's considerable opinion to say he didn't reach *his* potential. His self-deprecating but droll comment above might indicate ambivalence towards such a goal. Perhaps it's no accident that ersatz Elvises appear almost universally in Las Vegas style—the nadir of creativity for the performer himself, if truth be known, but the achievement of his potential for certain of his admirers.

A more sardonic approach from Kip Hanrahan's steamy, edgy universe suggests that potential can be about mundane behaviours and their meaning: social acts, for instance, or style (1992). In this sense, 'potential' is about how far one can go in the immediate physical world, and intuitively assessed in some way. The swimmer Ian Thorpe's marketable persona comes to mind—his *actual* personality is another matter.

If Tony Colton's musings are about relationship potential (or its demise), reading between the lines can be prescriptive and the point can be missed, no matter how elegantly the insinuating words might be written (1973). Steve Earle, on the other hand, interprets what could be a similar situation more prosaically, with a little nuance and ambiguity (1995). He suggests potential in this way requires acquiescence, respect, the right moment, and perhaps an attraction to the slightly melancholy.

That prospect was endorsed recently by Alain de Botton, regarding how he met his wife—recounted to the consternation of his extraverted interviewer (Bunbury 2004). If the right moment is there, then even losing composure is not a barrier. In fact, according to Amy Cooper (2004), it may be an advantage.

On reflection, respect and potential seem strange bedfellows, if you look at public success: in the sporting arena, for example. The dark, as well as the light, side of the Australian spirit is regularly on show in these environs, as the recent drama over a collapsing female rower at the Olympics shows. Also on display was a fair amount of inferior feeling—shadow, even—with occasional astute, if oppositional, comments from both thinking and feeling sides.

When the facts (introverted sensing in this case) emerged piece by piece, the initial observations (extraverted sensing) were shown to be insufficient, with a suggestion that the potential of the group might have in fact been reached. An attempt at respect was spun together for media purposes, but seemed unconvincing.

On the other hand, Earle shows respect to the musicians on his *Train a'comin* album (from which his lyric above is taken), calling them 'the *great* players on this record.' Emmylou Harris, Peter Rowan, Norman Blake and Roy Huskey might be achieving their potential in this sense, but they may hardly be considered household names in the general sense, except in the fields of country or bluegrass music.

Sometimes public or publicised potential doesn't look at ability or other issues at all well. In 1967, 21-year-old Andrew Jones was elected to Federal Parliament. Almost immediately, speculative discussion arose about Jones as a potential prime minister. Unfortunately for the speculators, after a few years he sank without trace, as far as national leadership was concerned at any rate, becoming a businessman.

The reasons why people should engage in rat-like behaviours have never been explained

In recent times, moving sideways has been called ‘downshifting’, doing something else—as though an inexorable ride to the top (or ‘up’) is the right and goal of everyone, and you should aim as high as you can. To me this seems to contradict what we know about individual differences and attributes, but perhaps that’s not the criteria involved.

Sometimes this kind of shift is called a ‘sea change’, adapted from the ABC TV series (and redefined from the original meaning), where escape from the rat race, with suitably behaviourist and Skinnerian overtones, is investigated or extolled.

Curiously, the reasons why people should engage themselves in rat-like behaviours, or even agree to do so, have never been satisfactorily explained to me by anyone, including those scientists who engage in such research. Jerome Kagan is but one who has recently criticised the notion that the behaviour of rats is relevant to human behaviour. He suggests that volition or purpose, crucial to understanding humans, and even some animals (including the rat), is something that cannot be measured or investigated in this way (Kagan 2002).

This can be a difficult proposition to take if you’re committed to the dominant views in cognitive science—even without rats. Robert Sternberg, a respected scholar in that field, and someone whose ideas I appreciate, recently edited a book whose theme was whether smart people could do stupid things (Sternberg 2002).

Folk psychology, and type users too, would probably say, ‘Well, yes’, fairly quickly, and perhaps quizzically—but not all of Sternberg’s contributors would agree. Depends on your definitions, I suppose: particularly if you presume a particular cognitive model as being the norm for all people, rather than something a little more complex and flexible, including natural subjectivity.

Taking this stance, though, makes you wonder how realistic this view of people might be. This is one of the points made by the philosopher Mary Midgley (2002) in critiquing, amongst other things, the notion that consciousness is an objective problem to be solved rather than

how best to fit together the different aspects of ourselves—notably ourselves as subjects and ourselves as objects, our inner and our outer lives. (p 10)

Such views don’t seem to have penetrated certain corridors of business power, and perhaps political power as well, which seems to be largely an extreme form of extraverted thinking. You can see that in denials of accountability for service failure or some human tragedy, sometimes a denial of feeling.

The Jungian analyst John Giannini, in his attempt to link the MBTI and Jungian communities, thinks this is because Western civilization is archetypically ESTJ, and excessively so, to the exclusion of other perspectives (2004). While this might seem to be a tough charge to lay, particularly for ESTJs, Giannini distinguishes the archetypal (thus more unconscious) expression of ESTJ from individual expressions. It’s an interesting argument, particularly as Giannini prefers INFP, but his intention is to help, not to scapegoat, and his text is a mine of information and reflection. For me, notwithstanding all that, it might be easier simply to talk about extraverted thinking.

If you think this archetypal approach is tough, Leon Gettler, using research and information on the clinical aspects of organisation behaviour, goes straight to pathologies regarding corporations and truth-telling (2004). Chris Argyris, amongst others, is a reference for a valuable look at the organisational unconscious, and reasons why organisations and the people in them don’t, or can’t, realise their potential, or their type for that matter (1990).

In saying these things, one presumes the beneficence of the organisation as a principle, and that people don’t express their potential elsewhere than in the workplace, which is a legitimate choice, to my mind.

Jenny Stewart thinks that, for people in organisations, part of the problem is that there is too much ‘blah’, meaning jargon or empty words. (Be aware of this when you teach type in organisations, as it may become just another form of ‘blah.’)

The words might be meaningless, but you have to adhere to them, particularly when seeking promotion or development potential: a modern-day Masonic handshake, as it were, given Stewart's identification of management as a cult, and leaders as its philosopher-kings. Astutely, she makes a distinction between the idealised form of the latter as expressed in books, journals and training courses, and the reality of people at the limit of—or exceeding—their potential.

One of the interesting things about paragons like leaders, or saints for that matter, is that there aren't many of them, and they are invariably unusual people. Jenny Diski has reported with horror on certain saints' proclivities. The MBTI was not invented by ordinary women in an ordinary household; quite the reverse, in fact. The same with Jung and his life, and many others.

I think Stewart's is a welcome perspective, particularly in the demystifying of jargon and organisational arcana. Perhaps, too, in their drive to achieve (however defined) or to realise potential, a person might lose themselves, notwithstanding their level of success, if any. Bertrand Russell's thoughts on the utility of idleness (1973) come to mind, and there are others.

There seems to be quite a deal of stress around aspects of potential: the right style of driving, of sugar in the coffee; finding the right words; desiring other people's goods, or wishing to emulate them. Alain de Botton has, in book and television form, skilfully and simply provided illustrations of how anxiety about status (more or less how one wishes to be perceived by peers and society at large) operates today, and has operated in the past.

In identifying stresses associated with what might otherwise seem to be mundane events and objects, de Botton shows both conscious and unconscious desires to fit in, including doing so by *not* fitting in. He points out that, somewhat paradoxically, an egalitarian society increases notions of status anxiety because there are no rules that define status, other than, perhaps, the market or the media.

Today we're told that we can be whoever we want to be. This can be a daunting task

and most of us, quite frankly, may not be up to it. Failure can stare at us in the face every morning if we gather (either from ourselves or from others) that we haven't reached our potential.

These sorts of presumptions can be personality related. Fitting in to society is largely an SJ perspective, in whatever era, and the rest of the types can dance around that, sometimes by acquiescing without thinking about it much, or hiding in the suburbs or out of town, quietly unconventional. In this sense, 'potential' is service to society.

NFs may see individual potential, essentially and logically a subjective judgement which is valuable in itself, but may at times not fit with that individual's aims or self-image. NTs may see potential in terms of learning or simply random self-autonomy; whilst for the SPs, potential may simply be in the moment.

The presumptions of the different types follow into the interpretation of life. I was recently talking to an intelligent and astute ESTJ woman, and I mentioned the age of my car. She then asked me why I still had the car, if it was a special type, or whether I was emotionally attached to it, neither of which was the case. But, to her mind, the car must have value in itself as an object, which it didn't for me, and I would never have considered it her way.

De Botton also shows us how culture mediates personality. You have to know something about 18th Century English culture, for example, in order to understand what those people might hold as status objects, how to behave, and so on.

It can be more permissible at one time in a society to be extraverted, at another time to be more circumspect; and the truths are different for each approach in what we need to know and what we expect to hear, as well as in the ways we define ourselves and the potential we're after.

I soon decided I was going to get nowhere as an introvert, and that I'd become an extrovert – and that's what I did.

Pete Townshend

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Peter Geyer (INTP) researches and teaches personality from an MBTI and Jungian perspective.

alchymia@ozemail.com.au
www.petergeyer.com.au