

## 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 1992*

*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 [1979]  
1995*

*I write you love songs on hotel note-pads.  
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  
(und.)*

What is potential? Is it an advertisement where the world of music in its various forms opens up for a child at a grand piano? Is it talent, or genius, requiring many 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, various 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 pre-requisite if the money dries up before 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 worldwide appear almost universally in Las Vegas style, the nadir of creativity for the performer himself, if truth be known, but the achievement of 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 someone 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 pretty 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 in a more prosaic style with a little nuance and ambiguity (1995). He suggests potential in this way requires acquiescence, respect, the right moment, and perhaps an attraction for the slightly melancholy – a prospect endorsed recently by Alain de Botton regarding how he first met his wife, recounted to the consternation of his extraverted interviewer (Bunbury 2004). If the right moment and time is there, then even losing composure is not a barrier. In fact it may be an advantage, according to Amy Cooper (2004)

On reflection, respect and potential seem to be 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 dramas over a collapsing female rower at the Olympics show. Also on display was a fair amount of inferior feeling, shadow, even, with some occasional astute, if oppositional, comments from both thinking and feeling sides. When the facts (introverted sensing in this case) arose piece by piece, the initial observations at the time (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 playing 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 country or bluegrass music fields.

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

In recent times moving sideways or "downwards" 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 a redefined term from the original meaning), where escape from the rat race, with suitable behaviourist and Skinnerian overtones, is investigated or extolled.

Curiously, reasons why people should engage themselves in rat-like behaviours, or even agree to do so, has 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 for understanding 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 ed., 2002). Folk psychology, as well as type users 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, 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*" (p10, [2001] 2002).

Such a view doesn't seem to have penetrated certain corridors of business power, 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 that this is because Western Civilization is archetypally ESTJ and excessively so, to the exclusion of other perspectives. (Giannini 2004). Whilst this might seem to be a tough charge to lay, particularly for ESTJs, Giannini distinguishes the archetypal expression of ESTJ (thus more unconscious) from individual expressions. It's an interesting argument, particularly as he prefers INFP, but his intention is not to scapegoat, but to

help, 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 goes straight to pathologies regarding corporations and truth-telling, in an article using research and information on the clinical aspects of organisation behaviour (Gettler 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 sorts of 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 part of the problem for people in organisations is that there's 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). So 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 her identification of management as a cult, and leaders as its philosopher-kings (Stewart 2004). 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 perhaps exceeding their potential.

One of the interesting things to be said about paragons, like leaders, or saints for that matter, is that there aren't many of them and they're invariably unusual people. Jenny Diski has reported with horror on certain saints' proclivities. And the MBTI wasn't invented by ordinary women in an ordinary household; quite the reverse, in fact. The same with Jung and his life, and many others. So I think Stewart's is a welcome perspective, particularly in the demystifying of jargon and organisational arcana. Perhaps, too, in the drive or pressure to achieve, however defined, or realise potential, a person might lose themselves, notwithstanding levels of success, if any. Bertrand Russell's thoughts on the utility of idleness come to mind, and there are others ([1935] 1973).

There seems to be quite a deal of stress around aspects of potential: the right driving style, of sugar in the coffee, finding the right words, desiring other people's goods or wishing to emulate them. Alain de Botton, in book and television form has 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) has operated today and 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, legal or otherwise that define status, other than, perhaps the market, or media. Today, we're told that we can be whoever we want to be, which can be a daunting task and most of us may, quite frankly, not be up to it. Failure can stare at us in the face every morning as a consequence if we gather (from either ourselves or 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. Potential in this sense 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.

And the presumptions of the different types follow into the interpretation of life. Recently I was talking to an intelligent and astute ESTJ woman and 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's also shows us how culture mediates personality. You have to know something about 18<sup>th</sup> Century English culture in order to understand what the 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 the ways we define ourselves and the potential we're after.

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