

## CHAPTER 5. Emotional Integrity: The Emotional Robot

Often when we speak of our emotions, we portray ourselves as robots: “He pushed my buttons.” “I was only reacting to what he said.” “He made me afraid.” In this view, emotions seem hard-wired, automatic: an unavoidable response to certain types of life experiences, where “Anyone would have gotten mad, or afraid, or sad.” In this view, I have little or no control of my emotions. The only way of managing my emotions is to control the type of event that tends to trigger them. If that particular song “makes me sad,” all I can do to manage my sadness is to avoid hearing that song. Psychologically, I see myself as an emotional robot, with limited power to shape my emotional life.

A frequent theme in science fiction films involves a battle between humans and robots. This theme appears in *Blade Runner*, the *Terminator* films, *Robocop*, and many others. The movie usually takes place in the distant future. Often, the humans and robots are nearly identical, save for one or two distinguishing characteristics—a mark on the face, a subtle difference in speech, a look in the eyes. The plot generally turns on distinguishing successfully between humans and robots. In *Blade Runner* and other films, the hero must even ask himself, “Am I human, or robot?”

I believe that there is a battle between humans and robots happening now, not just in the distant future. The battle is waged within ourselves, between different ways we look at our emotions. One part of us insists that we are emotional robots, and external events trigger our sadness, anger, fear and joy, as if we were machines. Another part of us insists that we have free will, and that emotions involve choice. How can we tell whether we are humans or robots? The key distinguishing characteristic is the language we use. When we say, “She made me mad,” “He

pressed my buttons,” “He scared me,” we are identifying ourselves as robots. We are saying that our emotions were triggered by what someone else did, and therefore emotional management is difficult or impossible. The only way of stopping a robot is when an external agent shuts it off or destroys it. If we use the language of free will in discussing our emotions, we identify ourselves as human: “I got mad not because of what you did, but because I made some unfortunate choices. I can do better,” “You didn’t make me sad, I made myself sad.”

The robot-view of emotions is an immature vision. Recall riding in a car as a child. We didn’t need to pay attention to the road, didn’t know what the buttons or levers did. We didn’t make the driving decisions—whether to speed up or slow down, whether to turn left or right. Car transportation simply happened: someone else was in control. When we regard our emotions as automatic reactions to life events, we are passengers in the back seat of our emotional lives, not aware of how to change the course of our emotions, not aware of any of the choices that could make a difference in the direction of the emotions.

When we finally learned to drive, we were schooled in what the levers and buttons and wheels did. We learned about how to make all the decisions necessary to get between point A and point B. We learned about defensive driving—how to make decisions to minimize death and danger when we were behind the wheel. We learned that, when we take the wheel of a vehicle, we are ultimately responsible for what that vehicle does—whether it involves bodily injury, the destruction of property, or breaking the law. Similarly, the adult view of emotions is that there are all sorts of things we can do to change the direction, speed, and destination of our emotions. There are multiple decisions that determine how our emotions are expressed. And when we take the wheel of our emotional lives, we are ultimately responsible for the

consequences of our emotions, whether those consequences are physical, psychological, or moral.

Let's take the powerful emotion of love as an example. Suppose I am in a committed relationship, but suddenly find myself attracted powerfully to someone else. This might lead to a secret affair, betrayal of my committed relationship, a tumultuous emotional war, and perhaps the dissolution of my committed relationship. If I take the immature view, I might believe "I had no choice—I simply fell in love." This is the robot-view, or the view of the child in the back seat with someone or something else in control of the vehicle. When I make a promise to a partner to "love, honor and protect until death do us part," the child-view has a secret caveat: "I promise this unless some powerful emotion—love, sadness, anger—comes along and sweeps me away. In that case, my sacred promise is null and void, because I would be out of control. In that case, I no longer need to love. I don't have to honor my partner with the truth. I don't need to protect him/her from my anger. I may betray at my leisure." This is similar to someone who has committed himself to a low-fat diet "unless I get hungry."

The mature view in that situation would be this: If I am attracted to someone, I see myself at the wheel with the gauges and levers in front of me. There are several options I might consider: 1) I could make the decision to avoid contact with them, minimizing the likelihood that anything more will develop. 2) I could talk to my relationship partner about this attraction, which would probably cause tidal waves between us, but might lead to our doing work on our relationship. 3) I could ponder the meaning of the attraction: why am I drawn to this person at this point in my life? What might that relationship look like, if I allowed it to develop? Laughter? Sexual exploration? Spiritual connection? What part of me is stirring, needing to wake up? 4) I could decide to pursue the relationship with the person I am attracted to, and see

where this leads—damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. My point is this: Whatever my choice, I am not a passive reactor to life-events. I am at the control panel making decisions about where I go. My eyes are wide open, and in the end I face a choice about my life—a choice where I have full responsibility for where I go and what I leave behind.

## **Achieving Emotional Integrity**

We are born with emotions—these are almost hard-wired into the human brain. Researchers have noted facial expressions in infants showing fear, anger, joy, sadness, disgust, and shame. Clearly, these are part of our genetic heritage. Emotional integrity, however, is not a birthright—it is an achievement. Emotional integrity means that I jump on the runaway buckboard of the emotions and grab the reins to take control. Emotional integrity means the buckboard stops here.

Emotional integrity means accepting responsibility for my emotions. It is a common habit to point towards others as the source of emotions. “*He* made me sad.” “*She* made me angry.” One difference between a boy and a man—regardless of age—is that a boy blames others for what he feels and does, but a man accepts complete responsibility for his emotions, values, and actions. A man with emotional integrity does not blame the external events of his life; he focuses on what he makes of those events.

Taking responsibility for my emotions does not mean that I *am* my emotions. Quite the contrary, it means that I have the ability to separate myself from my emotions while I am acknowledging they are mine. If I get angry with my son, I am not the anger. But the anger is my responsibility—I must own it and work with it. Imagine that I had a dog that got into the neighbor’s garbage. If I were immature, I would blame the garbage for attracting my dog, or blame the neighbor for putting the garbage

on the curb. If I am fully mature, I understand that it is my responsibility to watch my dog, confine my dog, exercise and train him. In the same way, it is not someone else's fault if I get angry. It is my responsibility to watch my emotions, to confine them, to exercise them, and to train them.

A person with emotional integrity accepts full responsibility for the effects of his emotions. These effects extend beyond the immediate, obvious effects. Men often say to me, "I don't have an anger problem. I never have hit my wife. I've never been arrested." This assumes that the only effect of anger is physical injury, and if he haven't bruised someone or drawn blood, he hasn't done damage.

My emotions do not end with me—they affect my relationships with loved ones, friends, and strangers. The effects of my emotions are not just the obvious ones—the broken door handle, or the black eye. Even if I don't explode in words or actions, the anger I carry has results. Communication is mostly nonverbal, and the subtle changes in my body—the tightening of my eyes, the bit lip, and the clenched fist also have effects in my relationships. These may cause a wall of fear and pain to grow between my children and me. Even if they do not speak of it, the people who know me may sense this wall. Taking full responsibility for my emotions means observing the effects of my emotions on those around me—seeing how my children and loved ones are changed by the emotional energy that I broadcast. In this way, I begin to understand myself differently. I am not just contained inside this envelope of skin. I see myself as a larger being, encompassing all the ripples in the world caused by my behavior, the chain of circumstances that are initiated by my actions, whether positive or negative. This means acknowledging my power to change the world, both positively and negatively.

Emotional integrity means congruity between what I say I feel and what my body language and actions say. This means that

I am aware of my emotions, and that I am honest with others and myself about what I feel, even when it is difficult. It means that I am willing to learn from others about what my actions may express to them. When someone says to me, “You didn’t talk to me this afternoon. I was wondering whether you were angry?” or “Your body seems to show some fear,” if I have emotional integrity I am curious about how others experience me, and am willing to consider what they say. This does not mean that I automatically accept their opinion about what my feelings are. But I am willing to ask myself what feelings reside within my behavior.

Emotional integrity means that I am willing to experience my feelings. I am not cut off from my emotions, even the difficult or painful ones. The Persian poet Rumi writes that being human is like a guesthouse, with many feelings appearing and wanting a place to stay. We often turn difficult feelings away at the door, not wanting to entertain them. Rumi encourages us to welcome them all, because each feeling has something to teach us. Emotional integrity means that I am willing to welcome my emotions and learn from them, as if each were a traveler with a story to tell.

The term *integrity* is derived from the Latin word *integra*, which literally means “untouched.” A person of emotional integrity *has* emotions, but does not identify with them. Rather than thinking, “I *am* angry,” or “I *am* sad,” the emotionally integrated man thinks, “I have anger,” or “I’m experiencing sadness,” or “Fear is coming up for me.” While he is fully experiencing the emotion, the *I* is separate and untouched, like the still point in the midst of the hurricane. So even though I experience all these feelings, I do not become swept away by them. I observe the feelings from a quiet, “untouched” place. This allows me to report my feelings calmly to myself and others. Rather than saying “Damn, you, you jerk!” I am able to report, “I’m feeling a lot of anger about your forgetting our appointment.”

Without emotional integrity, I am not whole or complete. An emotion comes, takes control of my actions, thoughts, and values for a while, then leaves. Another emotion then makes an entrance and takes its turn at the helm. Sometimes several at once are wrestling for control. Without emotional integrity, my personality is a rowdy mob, each member powerful and deeply primitive, crowding and jostling each other for dominance. With emotional integrity, there is a witness to the rising and falling emotions. This observing self makes possible an integration of all the disparate parts that had been vying for control.

The degree of change we can make in the world may seem slight. My actions are conditioned by my past—by my genetic heritage, by the environmental forces that have shaped me, and by the historical events that I face. So powerful are these forces, it is easy to dismiss altogether the power of my will to change the course of things. It is tempting to say, “The reason I am an addict is because my father was an addict.” Or, “Society conditioned me as a man to use anger to get what I want.” Or, “I was only reacting to what he said.” With each of these—biology, culture, and history, I have a readymade excuse for my behavior. I can announce that “I couldn’t help it,” then take my comfortable place on the crowded boat, while I am getting reassuring nods and pats on the back by others who have also abdicated their responsibility. When saying these things, I have made the decision to ride with the prevailing current of my life without trying to shape the direction of things.

In the face of these powerful forces, it is an act of heroic courage to say, “I am responsible for the man I have become.” It means that I stand up to the three-headed dragon with my sword and announce, “I have come to slay you.” This means that I assume responsibility—I carve out a place of choice, even when it seems foolish to do so. It means that I see myself as a change agent, one intent on shaping myself and the world around me. It is

an extraordinary act to face down the Forces of Things As They Are to attempt to make change. This means assuming the mantle of leadership in my life, showing a determination to fully know myself and to give shape to what I shall become.

In fairy tales, the hero often accomplishes his victory not through some gigantic, powerful weapon, but rather through the use of something small and insignificant: a pebble given by an old woman, a porcupine quill, or the patient and humble labor of sorting seeds. Similarly, the major victories I accomplish in the world may seem insignificant at the time. An encouraging word to a small boy, delivered at an opportune time, might lead to lasting changes in his life. A decision in a relatively small region of my life, such as cleaning up after myself at home, may lead to a reduction in my wife's resentment and make it possible for my marriage to survive. Despite the seeming minor scale of these victories, relatively minor actions may lead to huge, enduring changes in the world.

The Butterfly Effect refers to the great changes in the world that may be initiated by relatively minor events. A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil may start wind currents that could result in a hurricane destroying a town in Texas. A small pebble falling from a ledge on a mountain may start an avalanche that could destroy a village. But the potential power of small events is not limited to these disasters. A small act of kindness towards someone in need may begin a chain of events that could change the world in a positive sense.

It is true that not every event has effects as great as a hurricane or avalanche. But even those small acts that do not immediately initiate some dramatic change in the world may build towards that dramatic, visible change. Everything I do in my life has effects in the world, however great or slight. I must imagine myself a broadcasting tower, perpetually sending out effects to the universe in everything that I think and do. If I am thinking selfish,



negative thoughts, the effects of my behavior in the world will be selfish and negative. If I am thinking generous, positive thoughts, the effects of my behavior in the universe will be generous and positive. Those effects do not always produce immediate change, no matter how sincere my intentions. I may even become convinced that change will never come. However, the small changes build invisibly, and one day may come to a tipping point—the point at which the balance shifts, the chain-reaction begins which makes the change apparent and dramatic. Each small action that accumulated over time is essential in this process, even if the apparent change that it produced seems minor.

Maturation is not the same as aging. Apples can ripen simply by hanging on the tree until October. But for humans, maturity does not come naturally. It is simpler for males to remain boys—blaming others, remaining unconscious, depending on women, and dodging responsibility. Maturation is an achievement, something that happens only when I separate myself from others, when I start to expect more of myself. It takes guts: courageous awareness, a deep decision, and the willingness to struggle with every ounce of power. It is a journey upstream. It involves a decision to shape my life according to principles, rather than continuing to react to events without fully considering the consequences of what I do. To mature, I need to decide to grow towards manhood. I need to choose the sometimes perilous, thankless and solitary path that leads to emotional integrity.

## **Personality and Character**

Personality<sup>1</sup> is different from character<sup>2</sup>. A man's personality is his primary emotional programming, his temperament. It is “what

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<sup>1</sup> *Personality* is derived from the L. *persona*, “mask,” the term used for the masks that ancient actors wore. These masks were made to represent certain types of human emotions—happy, sad, fierce, etc. And a mask by itself is a thin covering, without depth.

comes naturally” to a person. It determines whether he tends to react to life with a pleasant smile, a sense of foreboding, a fatalistic shrug, or a defensive posture. Personality is something that is a given in a person’s life, the product of genes and environment. These are well-worn ways of understanding and responding to events. Personality seems ancient, natural, and automatic. It is a first-responder in every situation—quick and efficient. For instance, my first reaction may be to distance, or to get mad, or to empathize with others, or to tough it out alone. These first reactions seem to happen prior to thought or planning.

Imagine a person owns a house where an electrical fire breaks out. He calls 911, and the fire department arrives very quickly to put the fire out. When it is extinguished, the firemen leave. The man doesn’t get the electrical problem fixed, however, and the next day there is another fire. Again he calls 911, and again the fire department puts the fire out. Imagine this keeps happening for many years, until the daily call to the fire department becomes a familiar ritual. I would imagine that most of us would wonder why the man doesn’t get the electrical problem fixed, because that repair would eliminate the need for so many emergency calls. But in our emotional lives, we often do something very similar to the man in the story. We develop a first-responder solution to our suffering, and fail to address the deeper problem. This “first-

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Personality is also fairly general, without individual features. It is possible for me to have a personality, but little inner life.

<sup>2</sup> *Character* is derived from a Greek word *kharakter*, which referred to a marking instrument used for cutting or scratching something, used for making identifying marks or letters. Something that scratches or cuts me, marks me as individual. This is when something has hit me, had an impact on me, left its mark, scars. I carry the imprints of what I have been through.

responder solution” has happened so often, it becomes what we call our personality.

My personality is my first-responder to my suffering. It is my opening answer to the question: “What do I do with my suffering?” I may adopt a personality where the first response to danger is fatalistic sadness. Sadness permeates my life, and helps deal with danger by girding me for it, telling me that there is nothing to do, telling me that I almost will it to happen. Or I may adopt a personality style of avoiding pain at all costs. This helps me with suffering short-term. But long-term, pain is unavoidable, and I will eventually need to face it, but I will be untrained for facing it because of my habits of avoidance. These are first-responder solutions, but don’t do anything long-term to deal with suffering. In fact, they simply perpetuate suffering.

Character is a second responder. It is not something I am born with; it is something I must build, a moral achievement. It has a close relationship with personality/temperament, because personality is the earth from which character emerges. However, building character means that I work against my natural response to things, and choose a direction that is patterned after principles. In fact, character is not built directly. If I set out to build character, I build ego. If I set out to build character, my primary concern is not what I do or what I am, but rather how I appear to others. I may achieve success and fame and admiration, but not character. Character is a by-product of the decisions I make in the world. It is the by-product of my battle against my personality, my primary programming.

The main time for the building of character is after thirty. It begins when my primary programming begins to run into problems. I may have detected some flaws in the primary programming long before, but generally I need to run aground, to crash and burn many times, before I really get it. Generally, the logic of a young man when Plan A has crashed and burned is this:

It's just bad luck, I'll try it again and have better luck next time. Or: Just a small tweak in my plan will make it work. Or: If only he hadn't gotten in my way and blocked my view, I could have made it. This blithe persistence is admirable and necessary in a young man. If I have a son, I want him to keep getting on the bike after he wrecks, to keep his chin up, to bounce back after he has lost the game, to take failure lightly. I want him to stay hopeful so that he can go beyond what he thought his limits were. But my deepest desire for him is that he learns what I may not be able to teach. I want him to learn to search within the wreckage of his life for what is really valuable, to fix what he has broken, to hear a voice within that can lead him to something richer, to start over again after he has lost what he believed he couldn't live without. And I can't teach him these things because I'm lost in these woods myself. And perhaps, no man can teach these things to another.

It takes several crashes of Plan A before the realization begins to form: Plan A is not working. The problem is not bad luck or other people. The problem is Plan A—my personality. The work of character-building begins on the other side of the failure, after I realize I have squandered my birthright, blown the inheritance. It starts when the program has crashed, and I recognize that the flaws are not incidental, they are basic. It hits me that I must shape my life. I start to rebuild, to cobble something new together out of the ashes and debris. This is the humble, hard, day-to-day work of shaping myself as the man I want to become.