

Mastery; The Keys to Success and Long-term Fulfillment

By George Leonard

Epilogue

The Master and the Fool

“I want you to tell me how I can be a learner.”

It was not so much a query as a demand, almost a threat. He was a mountain man, with the long black hair, bold moustache and rough-hewn clothing of a nineteenth-century outlaw, one of a breed that lived illegally in the rugged hills of the Los Padres National Wilderness Area along the Big Sur coast of California — a place of buzzards and hawks, mountain lions and wild boar. Having just turned in the final proofs of a book on education (it was in the late 1960s), I had driven four hours south from San Francisco for a weekend of relaxation at Esalen Institute.

As I approached the lodge — a rustic building built at the edge of the Pacific on one of the few areas of flat land between the sea and the mountains of the Los Padres — I heard the sound of conga drums. Inside, the mountain man was sitting at one of the drums, surrounded by eight other people, each also at a drum. He was apparently giving an informal lesson to whoever cared to participate. One of the drums was unoccupied. I pulled up to the unoccupied drum and joined the others, following the instruction as well as I could. When the session ended I started to walk away, but the mountain man came after me, grasped my shoulder, and fixed me with a significant look.

“Man,” he said, “you are a *learner*.”

I stood there speechless. I’d never met this person, and he certainly had no idea I had just finished a book about learning. My conservative city garb had probably led him to think that I was a complete novice at the conga drum, the instrument of choice of the counterculture, and thus he must have been impressed by my seemingly rapid progress. Still, I was so pleased by his words that I didn’t inform him I’d played before. He proceeded to tell me that he was a sculptor who worked metal with an acetylene torch, and that he was badly stuck and had been for a year; he was no longer a learner. Now he wanted me, a learner in his mind, to come up to his place in the Los Padres, look at his work, and tell him how *he* could be a learner. He was leaving right away and I could follow him in my car if I wished.

The invitation baffled me, but I realized it was a rare opportunity to visit the forbidden haunts of one of the legendary mountain men of Big Sur, so I immediately accepted. I followed his battered sedan up a steep and torturous dirt road, then across a mountain meadow to a driveway that was nothing more than two tire tracks through a forest of live oak, madrone, and bay trees. For what seemed a long time, the car lurched and labored steeply upward, coming at last to a clearing near the top of the coast range. In the clearing stood several wooden structures: a two-room cabin, a tool shed, a crude studio for metal sculpture, and something that might have been a chicken or rabbit coop. At one point during my

visit, I spotted a slim young woman with flowing blonde hair and a long dress standing like a ghost near the edge of the clearing. He never mentioned her.

The mountain man showed me into a sturdily built cabin with a large front window looking 4,000 feet down to the Pacific, now shining like a sheet of metal in the late afternoon sun. We sat and made disjointed conversation for a while. I found myself somewhat disoriented. But for the presence of several conga drums, we might have been sitting in an early nineteenth-century pioneer's cabin. It was all like a dream: the unlikely invitation, the rugged drive, the mysterious woman, the expansive gleam of the ocean through the trees.

When the mountain man announced that we would now go and look at his work so that I could tell him how to be a learner, I dumbly followed him out, having no idea of what I could possibly say that would be of any use to him. He walked me through his sculpture chronologically, showing me the point at which he had lost his creative spark, had stopped being a learner. When he finished, he fixed me with his eyes, and repeated his question one more time.

“Tell me. How can I be a learner?”

My mind went absolutely blank, and I heard myself saying, “It’s simple. To be a learner, you’ve got to be willing to be a fool.”

The mountain man nodded thoughtfully and said “thanks.” There were a few more words, after which I got into my car and went back down the mountain.

Several years were to pass before I considered the possibility that my answer was anything more than a part of one of those slightly bizarre, easily forgotten sixties episodes. Still, the time did come when ideas from other places—all sorts of ideas—began to coalesce around my careless words of advice, and I began to see more than a casual relationship between learning and the willingness to be foolish, between the master and the fool. By fool, to be clear, I don’t mean a stupid, unthinking person, but one with the spirit of the medieval fool, the court jester, the carefree fool in the tarot card deck who bears the awesome number zero, signifying the fertile void from which all creation springs, the state of emptiness that allows new things to come into being.

The theme of emptiness as a precondition to significant learning shows up in the familiar tale of the wise man who comes to the Zen master, haughty in his great wisdom, asking how he can become even wiser. The master simply pours tea into the wise man’s cup and keeps pouring until the cup runs over and spills all over the wise man, letting him know without words that if one’s cup is already full there is no space in it for anything new. Then there is the question of why young people sometimes learn new things faster than old people; why my teenage daughters, for example, learned the new dances when I didn’t. Was it just because they were willing to let themselves be foolish and I was not?

Or you might take the case of an eighteen-month-old infant learning to talk. Imagine the father leaning over the crib in which his baby son is engaging in what the behaviorist B. F. Skinner calls the free operant; that is, he’s simply babbling various nonsense sounds. Out of this babble comes the syllable da. What happens? Father smiles broadly, jumps up and down with joy, and shouts, “Did you hear that? My son said ‘daddy.’” Of course, he didn’t say “daddy.” Still, nothing is much more rewarding to an eighteen-month-old infant than to see an adult smiling broadly and jumping up and down. So, the behaviorists confirm our

sense by telling us that the probability of the infant uttering the syllable da has now increased slightly.

The father continues to be delighted by da, but after a while his enthusiasm begins to wane. Finally, the infant happens to say, not da, but dada. Once again, father goes slightly crazy with joy, thus increasing the probability that his son will repeat the sound dada. Through such reinforcements and approximations, the toddler finally learns to say daddy quite well. To do so, remember, he not only has been allowed but has been encouraged to babble, to make “mistakes,” to engage in approximations—in short, to be a fool.

But what if this type of permission had not been granted? Let’s rerun the same scene. There’s father leaning over the crib of his eighteen-month-old son. Out of the infant’s babble comes the syllable da. This time, father looks down sternly and says, “No, son, that is *wrong!* The correct pronunciation is *dad-dy*. Now repeat after me: *Dad-dy. Dad-dy. Dad-dy.*”

What would happen under these circumstances? If all adults around an infant responded in such a manner, it’s quite possible he would never learn to talk. In any case, he would be afflicted with serious speech and psychological difficulties.

If this scenario should seem extreme, consider for a moment the learnings in life you’ve forfeited because your parents, your peers, your school, your society, have not allowed you to be playful, free, and foolish in the learning process. How many times have you failed to try something new out of fear of being thought silly? How often have you censored your spontaneity out of fear of being thought childish? Too bad. Psychologist Abraham Maslow discovered a childlike quality (he called it a “second naivete”) in people who have met an unusually high degree of their potential. Ashleigh Montagu used the term neotany (from neonate, meaning newborn) to describe geniuses such as Mozart and Einstein. What we frown at as foolish in our friends, or ourselves, we’re likely to smile at as mere eccentric in a world-renowned genius, never stopping to think that the freedom to be foolish might well be one of the keys to the genius’s success—or even to something as basic as learning to talk.

When Jigoro Kano, the founder of judo, was quite old and close to death, the story goes, he called his students around him and told them he wanted to be buried in his white belt. What a touching story; how humble of the world’s highest-ranking judoist in his last days to ask for the emblem of the beginner! But Kano’s request, I eventually realized, was less humility than realism. At the moment of death, the ultimate transformation, we are all white belts. And if death makes beginners of us, so does life—again and again. In the master’s secret mirror, even at the moment of highest renown and accomplishment, there is an image of the newest student in class, eager for knowledge, willing to play the fool.

And for all who walk the path of mastery, however far that journey has progressed, Kano’s request becomes a lingering question, an ever-new challenge:

Are you willing to wear your white belt?