

The Observer Effect, Part 1

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“Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking.”

Wallace Stevens, American poet.

The observed life is full of advantages. Learning from mistakes and errors, making thoughtful decisions and choices, predicting outcomes, nurturing and maintaining resilient relationships. The list of good outcomes from developing observational acumen goes on and on.

So why are we humans so spotty when it comes to leading an “examined life”? A life that, despite the demands and pressures of normal twenty first century living, moves in the direction of our goals and values. What gets in the way?

In the realm of psychology, there may be only one shared agreement on what it takes to move towards a more satisfying life. *Become a better observer.* The various schools of thought do not agree at all on *what* to observe but *to observe* is almost always step #1.

In my practice I generally bring up the importance of observation early on. In all sincerity, many tell me that they are already observant and “Its driving me crazy.” Or “I see it, I just don’t know what to do about it.” Reasonable reactions to problems that live in your face daily and are not letting up.

Some clarity on the slipperiness of observation crystallized for me on a fall day during a hike with a naturalist at the national park not far from my home. A dozen of us were following her on a gently ascending trail through thick forest. She stopped periodically to point out trees, shrubs, signs of wildlife. She saw things I didn’t even notice. Heart shaped deer tracks in the mud, a shed snakeskin poking out from under brush, a fungal disease on a tall oak.

We paused by a thicket of ash trees. She pointed to the understory of bushes blanketing the forest floor and noted that we would not be seeing some of these varieties on ahead as the elevation shifted slightly. We walked on and of course she was right. What was, for me, a minor change in terrain, spelled a major difference in plant viability. And I would never have noticed if the ranger hadn’t pointed out what was, actually, right there in plain sight.

No amount of resolve could have allowed me to see all of the forest floor. I had to be shown what to look for.

Of course, “looking at” one’s life is not so straightforward! It gets complicated. By what? Oh, let me count the ways. Probably headlined by this one “It’s too painful to look at.” Followed by “Does it really matter?” And then there’s “I’ll go into that when I don’t have so many other things on my mind.” And sure, let’s not overlook the always available detour into observing other people rather than self and staying stuck there.

Observational blindness is costly. In “the Amateur Marriage” novelist Anne Tyler chronicles an unstable and unhappy marriage (some marriage are stable and unhappy, research tells us) from courtship through post divorce days. The protagonist, the wife, is steadfastly unobservant of herself, and the husband is little better in the clarity department. The author has wryly given the wife a lifelong difficulty with directions, and she is a perilous driver. She dies in a “wrong way on the freeway ramp” accident.

It doesn’t have to be that way!

How can we achieve “the clean windshield effect” in our own lives? And what can we hope to gain?

An experiment in the world of quantum physics sheds some light. Called the “Double Slit Experiment” and replicated many times, it involves atoms, electrons, detecting the travel of minute particles through a slitted barrier, and the pattern of the particles on the other side of the barrier. A key conclusion (or puzzle) is that electrons which are observed by the experimenter appear to behave differently than electrons not under obvious direct observation. Suggested is the notion that the act of observing has a major effect on the outcome.

This accepted science finding has the world of physics in a state of wonder and bafflement. But it is consistent with what the field of human behavior has known for a long time. If you want to change something, pay careful attention. The seen cannot become the unseen.

What are some supports for becoming a better observer?

1. Spending time in the parasympathetic, slowing down. Leave the fight-flight state through meditation, other mindfulness practices, yoga, simple counting of the breath. Spending time in nature, in enjoying the arts, in listening to music.

2. Making time for reflecting on the day's observations. Keeping a journal of areas of importance. Example: at the end of the day, how did I handle my meeting with my boss? What went on with my anxiety level? Did I gather myself in, or did I fall into any familiar patterns of reactivity? How long did I stay reactive, what brought my feet back to the ground? And so on.
3. Using today's technology to learn more about self. Watches, fitness trackers and other wearables open a window to monitoring heart rate and oxygen saturation in the blood. Even those with little medical knowledge can start to watch their bodies react to life in real time. The interruption that occurs when stopping to pay attention to the body is an added bonus.

Let's go back to the issue of knowing what to look for. If there is a wide field of observation—like in everyday life-- where do we train the aperture? What is in the crosshairs? Stay tuned for *The Observer Effect*, Part 2 . . .

<https://plus.maths.org/content/physics-minute-double-slit-experiment-0>

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