

Introspective or Narcissistic?

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By DAVID BROOKS

Some people like to keep a journal. Some people think it's a bad idea.

People who keep a journal often see it as part of the process of self-understanding and personal growth. They don't want insights and events to slip through their minds. They think with their fingers and have to write to process experiences and become aware of their feelings.

People who oppose journal-keeping fear it contributes to self-absorption and narcissism. C.S. Lewis, who kept a journal at times, feared that it just aggravated sadness and reinforced neurosis. Gen. George Marshall did not keep a diary during World War II because he thought it would lead to "self-deception or hesitation in reaching decisions."

The question is: How do you succeed in being introspective without being self-absorbed?

Psychologists and others have given some thought to this question. The upshot of their work is that there seems to be a paradox at the heart of introspection. The self is something that can be seen more accurately from a distance than from close up. The more you can yank yourself away from your own intimacy with yourself, the more reliable your self-awareness is likely to be.

The problem is that the mind is vastly deep, complex and variable. As Immanuel Kant famously put it, "We can never, even by the strictest examination, get completely behind the secret springs of action." At the same time, your self-worth and identity are at stake in every judgment you make about yourself.

This combination of unfathomability and "at stakeness" is a perfect breeding ground for self-deception, rationalization and motivated reasoning.

When people examine themselves from too close, they often end up ruminating or oversimplifying. Rumination is like that middle-of-the-night thinking — when the rest of the world is hidden by darkness and the mind descends into a spiral of endless reaction to itself. People have repetitive thoughts, but don't take action. Depressed ruminators end up making themselves more depressed.

Oversimplifiers don't really understand themselves, so they just invent an explanation to describe their own desires. People make checklists of what they want in a spouse and then usually marry a person who is nothing like their abstract criteria. Realtors know that the house many people buy often has nothing in common with the house they thought they wanted when they started shopping.

We are better self-perceivers if we can create distance and see the general contours of our emergent system selves — rather than trying to unpack constituent parts. This can be done in several ways.

First, you can distance yourself by time. A program called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing had victims of trauma write down their emotions right after the event. (The idea was they shouldn't bottle up their feelings.) But people who did so suffered more post-traumatic stress and were more depressed in the ensuing weeks. Their intimate reflections impeded healing and froze the pain. But people who write about trauma later on can place a broader perspective on things. Their lives are improved by the exercise.

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Second, we can achieve distance from self through language. We're better at giving other people good advice than at giving ourselves good advice, so it's smart, when trying to counsel yourself, to pretend you are somebody else. This can be done a bit even by thinking of yourself in the third person. Work by Ozlem Ayduk and Ethan Kross finds that people who view themselves from a self-distanced perspective are better at adaptive self-reflection than people who view themselves from a self-immersed perspective.

Finally, there is narrative. Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia suggests in his book "Strangers to Ourselves" that we shouldn't see ourselves as archaeologists, minutely studying each feeling and trying to dig deep into the unconscious. We should see ourselves as literary critics, putting each incident in the perspective of a longer life story. The narrative form is a more supple way of understanding human processes, even unconscious ones, than rationalistic analysis.

Wilson writes, "The point is that we should not analyze the information [about our feelings] in an overly deliberate, conscious manner, constantly making explicit lists of pluses and minuses. We should let our adaptive unconscious do the job of finding reliable feelings and then trust those feelings, even if we cannot explain them entirely."

Think of one of those Chuck Close self-portraits. The face takes up the entire image. You can see every pore. Some people try to introspect like that. But others see themselves in broader landscapes, in the context of longer narratives about forgiveness, or redemption or setback and ascent. Maturity is moving from the close-up to the landscape, focusing less on your own supposed strengths and weaknesses and more on the sea of empathy in which you swim, which is the medium necessary for understanding others, one's self, and survival.