

The Observer

“Know the power of perspective. Be a passionate observer of life. See the events, feel the emotions, and recognize the difference.”

Jonathan Lockwood Huie

How might an aircraft pilot feel the first time that he activates the “Auto Pilot” switch? With seemingly endless hours of training now behind him, what emotions would suddenly appear once he takes his hands off the controls, allowing this mechanical winged creature to steer itself? Fear? Trepidation? Loss of control? All of the above? Yes. Probably all of the above. But there comes a point beyond release when all of these emotions are replaced with awe, wonder, and excitement.

As he cradles a steaming cup of coffee between both hands, our pilot might close his eyes while taking in the steamy scents of this chosen morning nectar. After taking that first sip he might open his eyes and look through the cockpit windows, seeing things as if for the first time. Taking in this lofty view of mountains that reach for skies bluer than he’s ever seen, he might gasp at the grandeur sprawled out before him. It is in this moment he may realize that all other moments in his aviation past were nothing more than periphery glimpses of the heaven that he now witnessed. This time he ‘felt’ the emotions of his elevated position and watches as the world gradually unfolds before him. He imagines the landscape is being painted by the hand of God as his vessel slips its way through crisp, clear morning skies. He feels his soul has been reborn – all due to a temporary release of control.

Moving from control to observation might be a trick that we should all learn to use. In this place called Earth we navigate with varying degrees of difficulty, but most will stake their claim to that need for control. Within the confines of this vessel we call our bodies and our minds, it isn’t hard to imagine a driver. Like a heavy equipment operator working the yokes, gears, hydraulics, and engine of a giant crane or tractor, ours too is very busy making sure that we continue to survive the madness and embrace the beauty of our world. This pilot, seated somewhere deep within our psyche, moves us through time and space. Rarely does our imagined driver find the time to sit back, relax, and take in the sights and sounds of existence. There is too much work to be done and only a single lifetime to do it.

What might happen should our self awareness, this spirited pilot, take some time off? What if we had within us an “auto pilot” switch that could be turned ‘on’ so that our friend might focus elsewhere for a time? What would be the outcome?

We do in fact possess “auto pilot” switches and we’ve all witnessed them in action... or rather, I should say, after action. I can’t count the number of times I’ve driven home from work and, upon arrival, didn’t remember a single turn, light, or how congested the traffic was. Sometimes I didn’t even remember driving home at all!! One moment I’m getting into my car and the next moment I’m checking my mailbox in front of my house.

Where did my awareness go? He sure as hell wasn't driving! And how did my body and mind function without him calling the shots? Driving is an excellent example of a common instance when we encounter that absence of cognition. But it isn't the only one. The number of times that I can recall my mind and body functioning absent of my awareness are countless. It occurs to me that these are the times that I am functioning with the "auto pilot" turned 'on'.

While a little frightening, this neat little trick forces me to ask a different question. Can awareness be absent of participation in routine and function while still being "aware" of routine and function? In other words, can our awareness observe our actions detached from its need to control them?

It can. But it isn't easy. At least it's not easy for me. Every time the form of my physical mind and body appears to be headed down an errant path, my awareness grabs hold of the controls to steer me clear. That's great if you're crossing the street into oncoming traffic, but not so great when you are trying to evaluate yourself from an observational perspective. Detachment of 'self' is easy enough in small bursts, but not so easy over an extended period of time.

But even with these small bursts I have discovered many benefits harvested from the result. Stepping outside myself and allowing my habits and routines to continue without any attempt to 'control' them has allowed me to view things and circumstances with a critical set of eyes. It has influenced and motivated me to move forward, in a positive direction.

An example of its effect can be seen in other, more objective terms. For instance, when I watch a show on TV or assess the situation of a friend, I find it amazing how quickly I can get to the meat of the issue and dictate best possible courses of action. I'll correctly guess the plot of a movie (my wife is amazing at this), or advise a friend – all based on my external observations of the circumstances. When the same set of circumstances arise in my own life I often overlook, ignore, or misperceive what was obvious when evaluating others. Physician, heal thyself!

I am beginning to learn how to give my alter ego, Mr. Awareness, a break from his control. When I do this successfully, things happen – positive things. Relaxing somewhere just behind my brow, he takes a front row seat to my reality. "Go ahead Sean, do your thing. I'm just gonna sit here and watch." He flicks the 'auto pilot' switch to 'on', cradles a steamy cup of java with both hands, leans back and takes in each moment with a calm resolve to SEE himself and assess what he witnesses. He is aware of every event. He can hear the buzz, smell the scents, feel the emotions as his detached mind responds to its environment. Fully cognizant, he views his world with the interest of an observer rather than internalizing the effect.

This body and mind receive his analysis in real time. Minor adjustments might even be made as he provides feedback on my performance:

“I’ve noticed a refusal to shave for several days in a row now. What’s that about?”

“You know, Sean, your wife is right. You really should try to get past your need to ‘win’ an argument with her. It’s an unrealistic goal!”

“I’ve got to tell you, Sean, that this decision you’re facing seems to have only a couple of realistic options. If you stay true to your passion you’ll have my full support.”

And on he goes, spewing brutal honesty into my mind’s ear and forcing me to take a step back and reevaluate my behaviors, my emotions, and my current direction. I must admit that I don’t always take all of his advice. As well, I don’t always succeed at changing some of those things that he so strongly suggests. But the positive momentum that provides significant self improvement is undeniable.

I’m not asking anyone to try to play these silly little mind games, perhaps landing themselves in Sunnydale Mental Institution. I’m simply providing a perspective that has worked for me in recent months. I’m guessing that I’m not alone. I’ve read several articles on how to “observe” reality with a sense of detachment. But the danger of confusing detachment with absent mindedness, apathy, or lethargy, compels me to avoid trying to convince others. Therefore this post is nothing more than a report of personal perspective. I imagine that you already know what ‘tricks’ work best for you.

Now with Self Awareness, my pilot through these interesting times, seizing control of my actions, he knows that this is where he needs to be – in his “office of cognition”. His attempts to provide a truthful insight into my state of being are never in vain. He is quite adept at seeing things that I’ve overlooked, and he doesn’t pull any punches. You might think that the result of this exercise would produce a sense of self deprecation. You would be wrong. Instead there is an awareness of light, love, and self respect.

Please understand that my pilot is not only keen to provide an assessment of my weaknesses, but he is equally anxious to show proof of my strengths.....strengths that are admired and that he hopes will continue in the future. He feels comfortable that, while he may operate a flawed machine, this vessel is perfect for his needs. He loves this contraption, and would not trade it in for anything else in the world. Not a George Clooney, Brad Pitt, or even a Bill Gates model. He is happily at home with me, secretly bragging about the perfect choice he made for this ride.

And so begins the beguine... of life.

Sean Yeterian