

Unmasking Emotional Intelligence
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It's Halloween!

Halloween is hands down my favorite holiday. It's a whole holiday all about asking, "what if?" What if I was an alien space pilot named Krejhh? What if I were a pokemon or a dandelion or a witch? What makes those characters what they are?

I love asking myself, "what if." And it's not just when I'm putting together a Halloween costume that I ask myself, "what if". I'm constantly thinking about how others might feel, and this is a big part of my emotional intelligence.

Wikipedia defines intelligence as "the ability to perceive or infer information, and to retain it as knowledge to be applied towards adaptive behaviors within an environment or context."

Asking myself 'what if' is one way to perceive and infer emotional information, but what is an "adaptive behavior" in the context of emotional intelligence? What's the *goal* of having emotions?

Emotions are a reaction to the world. We feel angry when something seems unfair, we feel afraid when something seems unsafe, we feel sad when we no longer have a thing that we wanted, we feel disgusted when something might make us sick, and we feel happy when we want more of something.

When I'm feeling a strong emotion, I come back to these definitions because they help me know what to do with my emotions.

If I trip over a toy my niece left in the middle of the hallway, I could express my anger and scream at her for leaving the toy there. But that doesn't fix the unfairness. Instead, maybe we could talk about why she left the toy there, and give her easier places to drop her toys that weren't in the way, or practice putting stuff away.

Emotions are a way of flagging things that happen to us and prompting us about how to respond.

Emotional intelligence is knowing how to go to the root of the problem, and fix what's unfair rather than just acting on the anger.

But how is this connected to spirituality?

One of the most spiritual places in my life were the buses on the way back from speech meetings in high school.

I was always exhausted, and the bus was humming-warm, the heater and the engine almost stifling in their noise. Beyond the windows, snowbanks blurred past. I'd eaten nothing but sugar for the last few hours.

I don't remember how the conversations began, but somehow my teammates and I started psychoanalyzing each other. I remember bouncing in my seat at the chance to tell my friends who I thought they were, and at the chance to be seen – to know what others thought of me.

Being on the bus after a speech meet was a magic place, a place where the usual limits of what you could talk about came down.

Nowadays I don't think I would be able to connect in the same way. I worry too much about hurting people. I'm more comfortable writing or, at least, practicing what I'm going to say first. I avoid telling people who they are, anymore.

Before I wrote this talk, I thought I'd gotten more emotionally intelligent after high school – even that, specifically, my rule of not telling people who they are was the most intelligent move. But after writing this talk, I'm not so sure. If emotional intelligence is always the careful, logical, risk-adverse voice, it cuts us off from spirituality, from the real work of being in the moment, of hearing a song that moves your feet to dancing without your permission, of laughing so hard you can't breathe.

It's easiest for me to rationalize my emotions. Fear is about when something feels unsafe, so just fix what feels unsafe. It's probably snow falling off the roof rather than a home invader, and if I just think about how humans are primed to pick up on weird noises and robberies are statistically really rare, that will *fix* the feeling, so I don't have to feel afraid anymore. I don't have to be in the feeling, if I can just think through it hard enough.

I prioritize logic over emotions nowadays. It might get me good results a lot of the time, but it's not the most emotionally intelligent way to live.

Spirituality, at its root, is connection. It's connecting to nature or to your deep emotions or to a busful of sleep-deprived speech and debate students. And emotional intelligence, at its best, is being able to feel your feelings. It doesn't feel like that's an “adaptive behavior” in and of itself, but we cannot connect to anyone else if we can't be honest about who we are, and the complicated feelings we have.

I believe there's a place for rationalization in emotional intelligence. It can be really helpful to recognize that, oh, I'm angry because I haven't eaten anything in six hours. And I don't think feeling your feelings has to look like screaming or smashing plates. It is enough to say, “oh, I'm angry.” Maybe that's because you're hungry, or maybe that's because the world is a deeply unfair place, or maybe both. Either way, knowing what you really feel is the first step towards doing something about it.

Emotional intelligence can give us the ability to really take in the world, and to cope with it when it's hard. It can give us the ability to handle a disagreement without destroying our own emotional state. And that means we have more ability to touch the world as it is.

Notably, all the wikipedia definition says about intelligence is “ability to perceive or infer information”. It does not tell us anything about where that ability comes from.

So often, when we talk about intelligence of any kind, people jump to the idea that intelligence is something you're born with. Some people are born geniuses, and the rest of us are not. In my experience, emotional intelligence is talked about the same way. Some of us are just *born* more empathetic, with more inherent capacity to be in our emotions or to stay calm and get the root of an issue rather than reacting.

Occasionally, I've heard people mitigate this at the last minute – oh, you can get more intelligent; IQ isn't static. But ultimately, there are still some people who are just *talented* to begin with, and no matter what you do you're probably not going to catch up.

I believe that there are some small differences in where we start out with intelligence of any kind, but these differences are magnified by our experiences.

Let's say a friend and I take an art class. During the first class, my lines are just a little smoother, and

my proportions a tiny bit more accurate. The art teacher compliments my work and doesn't mention my friend's work. I go home feeling good about art. In the next class, I find it slightly easier to pick up the lessons on how to draw single-point perspective – it only takes me five tries to get something pretty close to accurate. My friend would pick it up if they tried eight times, but they were already discouraged by the first class, where the teacher ignored them, and they don't have time to try out perspective eight times. By the end of the year, they're discouraged and think they're a bad artist. They don't pick up a paintbrush for the next fifteen years. Meanwhile, I've spent a lot of time practicing on my own because I've been told I'm good at art. What started out as a tiny gap has widened into a chasm.

I consider myself very emotionally intelligent. I've got a long way to go, but I am good at perceiving and inferring information about the emotions of others around me, and usually, I can do something about it. When I get past my anxiety about saying the wrong thing, I'm pretty good at making people feel heard and connecting to them. And even though I struggle with it, I'm getting better at knowing what I'm feeling, too.

This is because I spend so much of my life asking myself what other people are feeling. In part, this is because I'm a woman. Women are expected to listen, to care, and to work around what other people are feeling. In addition, I spend a lot of time writing emails to my therapist trying to sort out what I'm feeling and why because I find it interesting.

But I've also been taught how to listen. In high school, I took a chaplaincy workshop all about intentional, spiritual listening. I remember an exercise where we were to only echo things the other person said that resonated with us, rather than inserting any of our own experience. It felt awkward to do, but very spiritual to hear.

If I am emotionally intelligent, it's not because I'm talented – it's because I've spent my entire life learning how to listen to people, how to treat people like they have inherent worth and dignity, how to figure out what people might be thinking and find our common ground and not make them angry. And right now, I'm spending time trying to connect with my own emotions, recognize them and not dismiss myself.

We all have the capacity to get better at perceiving and inferring emotional information, and to get better at applying that info towards adaptive behaviors. And this work is not just possible, it's spiritually important. Our emotional intelligence is a tool for connection to others, and to ourselves. So, this fine Halloween Sunday, I ask you: what if? What if we all got a little more emotionally intelligent?