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Different gifts

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I believe three things are true about human nature:

- 1) every person is unique
- 2) each person is like some other people, and
- 3) all people are alike.

My ethical culture commitments come from my deep belief in the first -- that every person is unique. My work in family systems counseling confirms for me, more and more, that as human beings, we are all alike.

That every person is born unique and therefore infinitely worthy is an important recognition, one that allows us to treat all human beings as individuals, that prevents us from finding some people of less or more worth than others.

That all people are alike is also an important recognition, because it allows us to have empathy, an important component of ethics.

Yet, of course, it is a paradox that these two seemingly opposite principles can be true.

It would be impossible, though, to make any serious study of human behavior, if we could only assert either that all people were unique -- in which case we are all special cases -- or that all people are alike -- in which case we cannot explain the real differences among us.

So, while on one level, we are all unique, and on another, we are all the same -- it is often useful to study human nature somewhere in the middle -- by finding ways in which human beings fall into groups of similarities, with differences between groups.

I also believe that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. Theories about human nature, and about the similarities and differences within the broad category of normal human behavior, can help us in two ways. A good theory can help us to understand ourselves, so that we may grow into that truly unique self more fully, and two, to understand others, so that we may work with and relate to them better, for their benefit as well as our own.

There are many different ways to categorize human behavior, to group people by our similarities and differences. Some of them are more useful than others. The risks of categorizing are real, and it helps whenever we use human categories to remember those risks.

By categorizing people, we want to remember that it is still true, too, that every human being is unique and that we are all alike. That is, in our humanness, we are all one human family, and as individuals, we are all unique. The categories are conveniences, not final definitions, and certainly not ways to measure worth.

So I would say that a practical theory of human behavior is one which explains what can be observed in a way that helps us understand ourselves and others, and helps us to develop our uniqueness and relate to the uniqueness in others.

In other words: categories that are useful are ones that help us recognize our kinship as well as our uniqueness. Useful categories are ones that bring us together, ones that talk about differences rather than separations. Useful categories are also ones which are observable and predictable.

Judith Eckerson talked last week about one way to look at some categories of human behavior. People who develop different philosophies about how the world works, and how people react to the world, will tend to be drawn to different approaches to social action. For that matter, they'll tend to approach ANY organized human action in different ways.

Understanding that these are different approaches, each of which is valid in its own way, is more productive than arguing over which approach is inherently superior. Finding the strengths and limitations of each approach will help us to draw on the appropriate approaches in those situations where they are most applicable -- and either learn and adapt, or get out of the way, when our own approach is not as strong in a particular situation.

I also believe that the more different ways you have of categorizing people, the closer you get to the infinite varieties there actually are in unique individuals.

The theory about human differences that I've often found very helpful is the Myers-Briggs theory. Myers-Briggs theory looks at four dimensions of human differences. I present this today, not to tell you that this is the only theory, or the best theory. Certainly in this brief time I can't even hope to present this theory in a way that it's thoroughly clear in all its pieces.

Instead, I present it as an example of one way we can look at behavior in ourselves and others -- a practical theory that can, in some aspects of our lives, help us to develop ourselves and to relate better with others. It is an example of using a theory for bringing out the best in ourselves and in others.

The kinds of human differences described by the Myers-Briggs theory are differences which often cause conflict between people.

I also want to say this up front: I find that people with a little knowledge of Myers-Briggs tend to attach a four-letter code to each person. But the theory itself emphasizes that the four dimensions with which it is concerned are NOT the only dimensions of human behavior. People are not their Myers-Briggs type -- a simple four-dimensional code cannot explain the complexity of any individual. But it is a beginning -- it can explain some of the differences and similarities in human behavior.

Many psychological theories divide people into normal and abnormal categories -- and in today's world, I think we often see differences this way. And, we usually tend to think that whatever way WE function is the normal way -- and those who are different are abnormal.

The Myers-Briggs theory comes, originally, from work by Carl Jung, a therapist. Jung also believed that every human being is born with unique potentials. His interest as a therapist centered not around working with seriously disturbed people -- abnormal people -- but rather with average people, normal people -- people who were struggling to understand and develop themselves more fully

The material from Jung was further developed, in the first half of this century, by a mother-daughter team, Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Cook Briggs. Years of working with the statistics and measurements behind the actual instrument called the MBTI -- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator -- affirms the scientific validity of the measurement. The Myers-Briggs category measure something.

The chief applications of the Myers-Briggs theory have been in the areas of personal growth counseling, organizational understanding, and career counseling.

Many of you have probably taken the Myers-Briggs type indicator at some point -- other may have taken the other indicators, such as Keirsey-Bates, which are similar, but have not undergone such extensive validation testing. But again, today's attempt is to understand and appreciate the differences in human behavior. Understanding the specifics of our own type is beyond what I'm trying to do today.

According to the theory, there are four basic human mental functions: two ways of perceiving the world or taking in information, and two ways of making decisions, or rationally assessing the information that we have available.

I'll talk about the ways that we perceive information first.

Some people prefer to take information in through their five senses: seeing, hearing, touching, even tasting and smelling. Here-and-now is important -- practicality is something they value. These people prefer to focus on tasks in a linear way: with a beginning, a middle and an end. What is, now, is more relevant to them than looking at possibilities. Symbols -- whether they see them as positive or negative -- need to be connected solidly to some reality. Theories are okay (even such theories as Myers-Briggs) only if they are derived from observable facts, and can be applied practically.

Other people tend to begin with theories and the imagination, and then move to data. Much of their understanding comes in "aha's" or hunches or intuitions, and they usually prefer to focus on the gestalt or holistic sense, then move to the details if they must. In fact, these folks tend to find details aggravating or at least uninteresting. Details are okay if they help to confirm or explain some overall theory or idea.

The people who prefer to sense their world are people who see the trees -- the people who prefer to intuit their world are people who see the forest. I think it's clear that both approaches are needed, sometimes. And each has its drawbacks.

I also need to say here that Myers-Briggs theory does NOT say that people can do only one or the other. Maturity, or development, means in part learning to do, when needed, those kinds of behaviors which one is not necessarily naturally drawn to.

But it does hold up, in years of observation and measurement, that some people's preferred method of understanding the world is through the senses -- and others preferred method is through the mind.

This can be a source of conflict -- whether in a relationship, a marriage, a work group, or a social setting. Understanding that it is a different way of looking at the world -- and not a better or worse way -- helps us to draw on the strengths of others who differ from us, rather than judging them to be inferior, or stupid, or flaky, or whatever our favorite adjectives are.

By the way: in the general population, about 75% of people prefer to use their senses to gather information about the world, and about a quarter prefer to use their intuition. I have found that in groups like Ethical Culture Societies, the proportion is different -- about 75% of us probably prefer the more abstract intuitive approach, and 25% prefer the more concrete sensing approach.

Similarly -- the more education one has, the more likely one is to prefer the intuitive approach. This is perhaps not so curious, when we consider that higher education is more abstract than earlier education. Those who prefer the linear, concrete understanding of the world will generally not be as comfortable with the kinds of work one has to do to get a Ph.D. Those who prefer abstractions and ideas will probably be drawn to that kind of education.

Sensing and intuiting, two ways to understand the world, are the first two of the mental functions. The last two of the four mental functions describe how people make decisions with the information that they have.

Both of these approaches are rational decision-making approaches. They have, however, quite different assumptions about what criteria are best for making decisions.

Some people prefer to strive for objectivity in their decisions -- to remove themselves from the problem, to see it from the outside. These folks look for cause and effect, and strive for justice and fairness. They are often the critics -- asking questions, challenging themselves and others, looking for the flaws and inconsistencies. Most of these folks like to be appreciated for what they *do*. They value truth highly.

Others strive for a subjectivity -- they put themselves into the problem, try to see it from the inside, to personalize it. These folks tend to have a strong value system and judge by those values. They take emotions into account in their decisions, and strive for kindness and harmony. They generally don't like personal conflict, and will try to preserve or create good feelings. They like to be valued for who they are. They place high value on "the good." Myers-Briggs theory calls the objective decision-makers "thinkers" and the subjective decision-makers "feelers." That isn't to say that feelers don't think -- the rationality of their decisions is just based on different criteria. It isn't to say that thinkers don't feel -- they often have very deep feelings, though they are often uncomfortable with using them in the decision-making process.

I do want to emphasize, too, that there are levels of skill and maturity on either side. An undeveloped "feeler" may make rash decisions based on immature emotions. An undeveloped "thinker" may make rash decisions based on false reasoning.

An example I like to give of the latter is my own name. You may have noticed that it is spelled unusually -- JONE, with no A. It was my mother's attempt to spell Jone more rationally -- after all, almost everyone can spell the last name, Jones, J-O-N-E-S. It's only logical that one should spell Jone the same way. She wanted to make it harder for people to make mistakes. HA! She, being strongly inclined to the objective/logical approach to making decisions, thought this was a great idea. But, she was simply wrong in thinking it through -- while I like the name the way it is, it's also my experience that most people do NOT find it a rational spelling, but rather simply unfamiliar, and therefore confusing.

When I've done workshops in churches on the Myers-Briggs theory, I like to do an exercise which makes more clear the differences between the thinkers and the feelers, and the problems with groups or individuals who are unable to at least consider what the other approach might contribute to a decision.

I like to divide the group into three groups: those who clearly prefer the objective style (thinking), those who clearly prefer the subjective style (feeling), and those who are not clear about which they prefer. The latter group, then, tends to attract a mixture of preferences on this dimension.

Then I give each of the groups this problem to discuss and come up with a solution for: The church organist is 80 years old, and she's been the organist for the church for 45 years -- longer than most members have been members. Lately, it's become clear that she is not hearing well, and her playing has seriously deteriorated. She hits a lot of wrong

notes, and it's starting to affect attendance and therefore membership seriously. The church did not put anything aside for a pension for her, and she is dependent upon the income from this part-time position. So, what do you do?

What happens with the groups is this, predictably: the group of thinking-style folks come back quickly with their recommendation: "fire her, it's the only way to save the church." The group of feeling-style folks come back quickly with their recommendation: "we can't hurt her feelings, we'll just let her keep playing." The third group usually comes back with a more complex solution, which took them longer than either of the other groups: their solution usually has the pianist being moved into a mentoring role, money being found somehow to pay a pension (even if the church doesn't hire a new pianist), but she is definitely going to be moved out of playing the organ on Sunday.

The two like-minded groups work well together in making their decisions -- yet they each come up with very different solutions, neither of which will be very practical or successful. One approach -- fire her -- will likely result in serious conflict in the church -- the other will likely result in gradual deterioration and death of the church. The third group works more slowly, but in finding a way to use both modes of decision-making, comes up with a solution that is probably far more workable.

Similarly -- the sensors and the intuitors both have strengths and limitations in group decision-making. The sensors will tend to keep with the tried and true -- "don't fix what ain't broke" -- and, if the intuitive style is totally missing, they will tend to fail to see problems on the horizon, fail to adjust before it's too late.

The intuitors will tend to find innovative and even revolutionary solutions, often when the current procedures are just fine. Bored with what they see as the tedium, they can throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

Myers-Briggs theory goes beyond the four mental functions: the intuition and sensing styles of gathering information, and the thinking and feeling styles of making decisions.

The next dimension describes the difference between people who get their energy interacting with the outer world or with the inner world. There's a lot of new research, outside the Myers-Briggs community, that shows that the differences here are developed very early in life, and that we may very well be born with a strong and almost-unshakeable preference for one or the other. (Myers-Briggs theory also asserts that the other preferences are present from birth, or rather than one is born with a tendency towards one set of the preference of all the dimensions, but I tend to be more skeptical of that, until there is more confirmation of the innateness of the tendencies from scientific study.) But the difference between preferring the inner life and outer life seems pretty clearly an early and strong pull on us.

Myers-Briggs theory calls these preferences Intraversion and Extraversion. The words are used for similar purposes in our common vocabulary, but they are slightly different in this technical vocabulary. Shy is not exactly the same as a Myer-Briggs preference for intraversion, for instance, nor is gregariousness necessarily a part of extraversion -- though they do tend to correlate highly.

Intraverts receive energy from their inner life -- extraverts from their outer life. Intraverts are often tired by relating to people and objects in the outer world -- extraverts often find that when they have to spend time in reflection, that tires them. Intraverts usually consider carefully what they will say before they say it. Extraverts think out loud.

Couples -- or any two people who work together or spend time together -- who are both extraverts will find themselves often competing for air time. Intraverted couples will often spend much of their time together quietly, silently. In couples where one is intraverted and one is extraverted, they often have developed a way of relating where the extravert does the outside relating for both of them. Any of these matches can work -- if they understand what is going on, and respect each other, and work through the limitations. Again, the maturity of each style is important, as well as the respect for the differences (or similarity). Immature extraverts working together may become too competitive to work well. Immature intraverts may simply drift apart. Immature extravert/intravert pairs may have lots of misunderstandings: the thinking-aloud of the extravert may seem invasive to the intravert, and the internal-thinking-time of the intravert may be seen as lack of interest or lack of involvement to the extravert.

The last dimension that Myers-Briggs deals with is derived from the others. People tend to either gather information in the outer world and make their decisions internally, or, vice versa, gather information internally, and then make their decisions in the outer world.

The perceivers -- those who gather information publicly and make decisions privately -- tend to be flexible, open, and responsive. The judgers -- those who make their decisions publicly and gather their information privately -- tend to be decisive, organized, and planned. The perceivers get bored by routine -- the judgers get impatient with a lack of focus.

As with the other dimensions, both approaches are valuable, and both can be exercised with more or less maturity and skill. Making decisions too quickly and putting off decisions past the point when it's too late are both problematic.

I find, in observing relationships between people, that the intravert/extravert difference is the most easily overcome -- as long as the intravert learns to speak up and ask the extravert to give a bit more privacy, and as long as the extravert learns to be a little restrained and not overwhelm the intravert by talking too much and too soon.

The senser and intuitor often have difficulty understanding each other. They often truly seem to be on different planets, though they may often totally miss that they are thinking differently. A style often feels totally alien to one with the other style. Misunderstandings are common, and are easily attributed to idealism versus practicality -- value-ridden differences rather than simply different styles. Yet both functions are important: gathering of the detailed facts and understanding the patterns and gestalt.

The thinker and feeler are often most likely not only to misunderstand each other, but to value the other style far lower than one's own style. The thinker may find the feeler to be "too hot" and the feeler may find the thinker "too cold." I hear these two styles calling each other "wrong" more often than with any of the other dimensions. Attributing an evil intent to the other is common.

It may not surprise you to know that this is the only dimension of Myers-Briggs types that shows a difference between men and women. In American culture, about 60-75% of men prefer thinking/objective style; about 65-75% of women prefer the feeling/subjective style. A lot of the material about men's style vs. women's style may reflect the thinking vs. feeling contrast.

(I've also found that Ethical Societies tend to attract a larger-than-average percentage of men who are feeling types and women who are thinking types. I suspect this is partly because we don't insist on traditional or expected behavior -- perhaps another feature of our drawing a larger proportion of the intuitors or innovators, rather than the sensors or traditionalists!)

With the perceivers and judgers, the misunderstandings are often serious, though not so value-ridden. Arguments over what are really simply differences in preference in this dimension are second only to the number of arguments over thinking vs. feeling.

Let me tell you a story that may illustrate how these styles work in a real effort at human relationship:

I once led a workshop for a church that was searching for a minister. I used the Myers-Briggs theory to help them understand the differences among them, so they could appreciate each other more, and draw on their many strengths. I also used a number of other tools, reinforcing my own bias that one tool for categorizing is never enough, that one needs many tools to come closer to understanding the complexities and realities of human behavior.

In one exercise, I used the Myers-Briggs mental functions to divide the group -- without telling them I'd done this -- into those whose external functioning was primarily intuitive, primarily feeling, and primarily thinking. Being a typical well-educated group, there were no participants in this small group who preferred sensing in their external functioning.

Without telling them how the groups were formed, I assigned them to brainstorm a list of what they liked in a Sunday morning program. After they'd completed their three separate lists, I told them how I'd divided the groups and asked

them to present their lists. The results were so strongly skewed, if I'd scripted the differences it would have looked as though I'd faked them!

The intuitive group had a list about three times as long as the others (they like to gather information, not make decisions, and they are comfortable with ideas). Being innovators, they had listed only things that COULD be done on Sunday that they'd like to try, but none of these ideas had ever actually been done.

If there'd been a sensing group, we would probably have heard about the physical objects they valued, and the traditions they wanted to continue. In other groups where I've done a similar exercise, the results have usually looked like that for the sensors.

The thinkers reported second. Their list was neatly presented, with numbered items. They'd even drawn lines on the paper so that the writing was more clear.

As they listed all the things they like about an address on Sunday morning, the feeling-types were literally out of their chairs and rolling on the floor, laughing. Because they suddenly realized that in their list of items, they'd completely forgot the address!

What a wonderful way to see that they each valued differently what is presented on a Sunday morning, and that if only people with one type are involved in planning and organizing and presenting, people with different preferences may not be comfortable -- and the differences may become exaggerated as people self-select their group membership. Understanding the differences, seeing them as differences rather than wrong-headedness or stupidity or flakiness, and appreciating the contributions of people with differing preferences from our own, are ways that we grow as more fully-developed people.

Depending on the environment of family and culture in which we were raised, we may be encouraged or discouraged in our own preferences. We have the potential to continue to grow and change through our lives -- most people raised in environments where they are encouraged to be themselves spend their first 25-30 years becoming better skilled at tasks that match their preferences, with more and more skill at "the other side" of those preferences. In our late 30s and 40s, most people either become rigidly attached to their preferences -- or they decide to enrich their lives, and may spend even more time developing skills in their non-preferred styles. Thus, the logical thinker may, in his 40s, seriously work on relationship and emotional issues. The intuitive person may take up hobbies that involve making things, touching, sensing. The sensing person or the feeler may work towards an advanced degree in philosophy.

Most people have higher job satisfaction where they are able to act in their preferred styles, and so they choose jobs that draw on those preferred styles -- at least more than the average. But because we are more complex than just the four Myers-Briggs dimensions, sometimes we make job choices for other reasons, and then look outside our jobs for the fulfillment that we seek.

We may choose relationships with people who are very like us -- and find reinforcement for our own strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes resentment when someone HAS to do the tasks that are less interesting. Or we may choose relationships with people who are different -- find that more of the normal tasks of life can be done effectively, but even with respect and appreciation, find ourselves confused or in conflict.

Honoring the differences -- whether these, or others -- is important. Appreciating that those who are different may help complete the wholeness is important.

There's nothing so practical as a good theory. All people are alike. Each person is like some other people, and different types help support and balance each other. And every person is more than the labels and categories and styles they share, every person is unique and of infinite worth.