

You Have a Horse in the Kentucky Derby



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In my experience, most people come for outpatient psychotherapy not because they are ill (some are, some aren't) but because they are stuck. Either life has thrown them a curve that has them stymied or—equally common—they know what they want to do but they can't accept this inner knowledge.

For various reasons, some people are unaware of their feelings. Their feelings are not a welcome part of daily life. Other people know their feelings but disapprove of them.

Sometimes people confuse thoughts with feelings. Often we say "I feel" when we really mean "I think." Thoughts, rational or irrational, lie within our control. Feelings, however, do not: while we can decide how to honor and express them, we cannot choose which ones to have or when. Feelings just are.

Properly cultivated, feelings are invaluable guides that tell us what we like and want and what we don't like and don't want. People who cut themselves off from feelings miss much of life's richness. They eventually find themselves living in black and white.

To develop your self-awareness, try asking yourself how you feel frequently throughout the day. In time you will have the answer almost instantly. If you do not start getting regular news bulletins with a little practice, you may need to leave the beaten path of your daily life—to seek out new experiences so that you can notice your response to them.

Sometimes people lose touch with their feelings by disregarding their bodies. The mind is hardly separate from the rest of our anatomy, and to get the best results from our brains we must take care of the physical plant, so to speak. You know the drill: eat right, exercise daily, get enough sleep, watch your health, make time

for recreation, and live moderately. To break these rules is to abuse your body. If you beat up on yourself, how can you expect to do your best work in the world?

Imagine, for the sake of argument, that you have a horse in the Kentucky Derby. Your window of opportunity will open just once. To qualify for the race, your horse can be neither two years old nor four but only three.

How will you care for the horse and groom it for its moment of fame? Will you buy feed on special at Agway, pick up a blanket at Target or Wal-Mart, and entrust its exercise to the teenager down the street?

Of course not. You will want your steed to have the best of everything—the finest oats, the softest blanket, and the savviest trainer money can buy. Only then will you feel satisfied that you are giving your horse its best chance of winning the race.

So much for metaphor. In fact, as you see, you *do* have a horse in the Kentucky Derby. Existentially speaking, this is your only race, your only shot at the goals you have set for your life.

Make each remaining day count. Be kind, gentle, loving, and forgiving with yourself. Remember the words of the flight attendants before takeoff: if the oxygen masks drop down, always put yours on before you assist your child with hers.

You must put yourself first—provide for your own wellness and your essential needs as an adult—before you can reach out compassionately to the rest of the world.

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