THE FOOL
as an
Optimally Functioning Human Being

Judith Gregory

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS
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IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.
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Forward

Judith “Jude” Gregory was on staff at the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University from 1963 until 1973. She started as a typist/transcriptionist, then became a secretary, then a writing tutor, and then a counselor.

Jude read the first section of this essay at Morning Prayers at The Memorial Church, Harvard University in 1973. She completed the second section based in part on feedback from her listeners, and she submitted the combined essay as a paper for a course she was taking at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (G-237 “Optimal Human Functioning”).

As a counselor, Jude cared deeply about the challenges of being present to her own and others’ experience and to speaking what is true. Her essay, edited for this collection with her permission, is an exploration of the foolishness and saintliness of all such efforts.
THE FOOL
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(T)

Tarka the otter – the hero of a remarkable animal biography (Williamson, 1928) – goes hunting with his mate. She is killed by a farmer while the wounded Tarka escapes. He does not know she is dead and he waits all night in the farmyard. Finally, he leaves, and then he forgets. He finds another mate and lives on in a recurring present.

Some may live lives like Tarka. I – like many others, I imagine – find it hard to forget. “Stuck fast in yesterday,” bound by memory, I am still involved in the past, consciously or not, indulging in its beauty, yes, yet often pursued by incompleteness and pain. I make now in fantasy the gestures of affection that, because of diffidence, I never really made. I still feel tense with anger that I never expressed. I am ashamed of my negligence. I live with much nostalgia and regret.

I am, like Tarka, an animal – yet I am not altogether like Tarka. The difference is endlessly intriguing. Can I live in the recurring present without forgetting my friends, without losing the sense of recognition that seems, though shared by animals, so particularly human? Can I be fully alive now – and here – while I also long for someone far away in space or time? I want to know and to express my feelings now – or feel free to choose not to express them. I want my past to be as rich as possible and yet to have no power now over my energy, my attention and my judgment. Can this be?

The figure that has helped me most to understand what it means, concretely, to be present is the figure of the fool. What have I learned from the fool? Let me suppose that you are a fool, and I’ll try to tell you.

You foolishly accept the world rather than find fault with it or try to change it. You fall in love with everyone and everything, which is of
course foolish because you get badly hurt, are often, apparently, very, much mistaken in your love, are easily deceived (Gandhi said once that he was born to be deceived).

When you and I meet for the first time, like a fool you don’t make use of your experience to help you know who I am. You never take into account my sex, my clothing, accent, race or hair style. You very foolishly take me for the only person of my kind! However rudely I may act, however indifferent I may seem, however despairing or outcast I may feel, regardless of clichés about the kind of person I appear to be to others, you let me be, and in time I can become my whole self, in your presence.

When we are close friends, you very foolishly forget how angry I was yesterday, how hurt by your attention to another, or how I went away last month without saying goodbye. You don’t forget me, you forget my mood, my words and actions of that time. You greet me, indeed, almost as if we’ve never met. This disconcerts me, yet how much I learn! I am drawn into the present by someone who will know me only now. I’d like to take up the emotional tale – but you (like a fool) have forgotten it. I become present as I have never been before, to myself as well as to you. I come to know my present feelings, tentatively to express them, daring to know that you accept me despite my sense – because of what my past has been – that I am not acceptable. My past somehow no longer has control over my present.

I ask, in this moment without history, “How is it that you know me so well?” I feel like a friend, even when I am a stranger. I feel recognized and I feel also free to grow and change. You have given me the most wonderful gift of all: myself.

(II)

In this sketch of the fool, I seem to have presented the figure of the fool as a human being functioning optimally for others rather than for her or himself. But is there an optimal combination or balance in a person’s life of the sense of self, of autonomy, and the sense of rela-

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Gregory, J. The Fool as an Optimally Functioning Human Being.
tionship, of mutuality? How does joy in one’s own life relate to the good of all?

Aldous Huxley wrote somewhere that a saint is someone who knows who he is. The connotation of “saint” is holiness, which in turn connotes what is whole and hale, which certainly connotes an optimal state of being. This wholeness – that is, presence to oneself – seems to bring about a more complete presence to others; from this, I believe, comes the connotation of the saintly life that it is a life lived for others.

Simone Weil wrote somewhat differently of the saint – as a genius, not a fool (not the first time these two have turned up together!):

We are living in times that have no precedent, and in our present situation universality, which could formerly be implicit, has to be fully explicit. ... More genius is needed than was needed by Archimedes to invent mechanics and physics. A new saintliness is a still more marvelous invention.... We have to ask for [genius] daily, hourly, as a famished child constantly asks for bread. (Weil, 1951, p. 98-99).

What does this mean? Does it mean that it takes a genius to be a fool?

It seems that perhaps the genius of the saint is to know her or himself in terms of a fully explicit universality, and also to be present to others in terms of a fully explicit universality. It requires awareness and acknowledgement of the full range of our potential consciousness, feelings, and actions, and of the same in others. It seems to require openness to what is and to what may be rather than the assumption of what is supposed to be.

It requires an awareness and acknowledgement, explicit at some level, of what is within us and of what is before us – of what each human being may be potentially, and of what s/he is actually in the moment. I believe this is the “genius” Weil meant. It is the genius of science that sees what is there – actually and potentially – and finds a way to acknowledge it; the genius of art does this too, as does the genius of therapy or teaching; so, indeed, does the genius of saintliness, and of foolishness.
Saint and fool are then perhaps two names for the same person: the one who knows who s/he is and who also knows me.

We can’t help having mixed feelings about the fool, feelings that cause us to question the nature of “optimal human functioning.” Is this person crazy or extraordinarily sane? Is s/he stupid or wise, childish or greatly mature, sick or somehow healthier than the rest of us?

Insofar as anyone is a fool, s/he relates to others in the immediacy of experience. This vitality and responsiveness is attractive, extremely charming – the fool is very much in touch with the child within – yet it also tends to involve the fool in situations that don’t work out, that aren’t very “grown up.” The fool seems to be able to live many different lives in the explicitness of immediate experience, very much like a child.

The saint seems to be a less ambiguous figure than the fool, is more openly acknowledged as an ideal – yet which of us wants to be a saint? We tend to feel that such a life would be great – for someone else, for us to read about, to see in a film that we can leave deeply moved. What is the source of our reluctance?

We are reluctant, it seems to me, not because the saint may be a less than optimally functioning human being; we are reluctant because of the risk. To be a saint involves the risk of pain, disappointment, loss, abandonment, deception, the risk of being driven “crazy” by the full force of awareness, and even the risks of injury and death. Everyone runs these risks in life, of course, all the time. The difference is that the fool runs them willingly, seems almost to choose them – the fool, indeed, has a genius for making things explicit!

Despite our reluctance, we are powerfully drawn to the fool. In the midst of such remarkable explicitness, the fool is a symbol of the ambivalence we feel about so much of life – that sanity seems to be madness, progress seems to be destruction, and growing up seems to be slowly dying. The fool seems, as Kiyo Morimoto has observed, to accept ambivalence as “a natural part of living” (Morimoto, 1973, p. 5), and we are drawn to one who, while making alternatives so very explicit, seems also able to help us solve the riddle of living at peace with ambivalence. “Feelings of ambivalence emerge out of caring: when we care then we must act and in order to act we must
choose.” (Morimoto, 1972, p. 9) When we choose, we face loss. We feel we will be torn apart, and maybe we will be – the fool chooses and acts, fully caring, as if this were not so, or despite its inevitably being so.

Ambiguity remains always in the midst of explicitness, for we can none of us see fully, not yet, not as long as we are human, not as long as we are alive. It seems that the fool is a symbol of our longing for manifestation, for the incarnation of universality – for the full explicitness of being. Maybe what I’m trying to say is that in being fools for each other we are all enabled to become most fully ourselves, and are thus again most fully present to each other. The balance of self and relationship with others, the full attainment of mutuality, comes with our willingness – all of us – to be fools.

References


