

Opinion **FT Magazine**

# What we can learn from people with beautiful minds

Gather insights, dismiss orthodoxy: the eight habits of the highly intelligent

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I realised early in life, even in the family home, that there were much cleverer people than me. (Commenters, please fill in your own jokes here.) But I also realised that intelligence wasn't static.

When people say "X is brilliant", based on his university degree aged 21, it's a meaningless statement — X may not have developed since then. You can make yourself more intelligent. One way is to study people with beautiful minds. Here are some of their habits:

- They treat every situation as a learning opportunity. If you fall into conversation with one of them, no matter how low status or stupid you are, they will absorb what you say. They won't try to "win" the encounter by hitting you with jargon, titles, name-dropping or recitations of stuff they thought up years before.

At a wedding once, I got talking to an older guy named Bob about US healthcare. Later, the bride's sister asked me what I'd thought of Bob. "He's not dumb," I said generously. "No," she agreed, "he won the Nobel Prize for economics." "What was his specialism?" I asked. "Healthcare," she said. And yet Robert Fogel had probably listened more attentively to me than I had to him.

- They can clear their mind to see the other person. People who have a gift for seeing the world usually keep their cameras pointed outwards. Neurotics and narcissists can't do that, though they can be great artists of their own interior (think Woody Allen).

- They often suffer anguished boredom in ordinary social life. They feel there is so much to learn that there's no time to waste on route talk, kitchen renovations, real estate prices, gossip about the local schools, or conversation-enders ("Interesting!" "Funny!").

One friend of mine, after correctly diagnosing himself as highly gifted, was excused by his wife from having to socialise with his brother-in-law any more.

- They are specialists, yet are always trying to master other fields. I got to know Walter Mischel, the psychologist who helped change our understanding of personality, in his final years before he died at 88. He'd sit there with cocked head, listening intently to everything that everyone said. Above him, on his apartment walls, hung wonderful paintings — his own, produced in his eighties.

Similarly, Edward Said, the scholar who helped found the field of postcolonial studies, was an important music critic.

These people respect expertise, because they know from experience that it's hard-won and cannot be generalised from one topic to all others. They aren't like the businessman who goes into politics assuming that the same rules will apply and that he's smarter than the idiots who still haven't even solved unemployment.

But they do seek to cross-fertilise from one field of expertise to another. Francis Crick ended up co-discovering DNA partly because he had come to biology from physics, bringing with him a fresh pair of eyes.

- They gather insights from many different realms. The best non-fiction book I know is Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). It's a blend of history, philosophy, her own reportage (from the Jerusalem courtroom at Adolf Eichmann's trial) and — though this is unstated — her personal experience as a refugee from Hitler's Germany.

- They do the work they want to do, not the work the world seeks to impose on them, even if there's a cost to their career or income. In Warren Buffett's terms, they use an "inner scorecard" (an internal gauge of merit) rather than an "outer scorecard" (society's estimate of merit).

They have no interest in becoming insiders, or rich or famous. They tend not to stay in large hierarchical organisations, either public or corporate, where they have to toe a party line and do work that bosses assign them.

For much of the past century, beautiful minds have clustered in academia, but that's changing: increasingly, academics are rewarded for deep knowledge of

their discipline's conventional wisdom, as fields become more hierarchical, technical and specialised.

- They have the imagination to come up with ideas, but also the humility and technique to test these against data. Hortense Powdermaker, in her classic anthropologist's memoir, *Stranger and Friend* (1966), describes spending a long weekend in New Hampshire in 1932 at the summer house of the anthropologist Edward Sapir. "The remarkable flow of conversation" between the host and another house guest, the psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan, awes her.

She attributes it in part "to their personalities — each man seemed to combine within himself something of the scientist and of the poet". The poet has the ideas; the scientist tests them.

Thanks to this testing, people with beautiful minds in the modern world learn that there's no big idea that explains everything. Esther Duflo, who this week became the youngest winner of the Nobel in economics, told me in 2015: "Big ideas are very seductive. I believe in small ideas."

- People with beautiful minds say what they think is true — not what's socially appropriate, or lucratively controversial, or conventional wisdom, or optimistic, or beneficial to their political side. (They don't stick to orthodoxy).

We can all be a bit more like them, if we try.

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Letter in response to this column:

Beautiful minds create more than they consume / From Hilda Burke, London W6, UK

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