



# MATTHEW GILBERT:

## Now Thyself



Centuries ago, the Buddha extolled the importance of the present moment. In the psychological laboratory of the 1960s, psychedelics pioneer Richard Alpert, aka Ram Dass, wrote *Be Here Now*, a free-wheeling spiritual travelogue that still sells remarkably well. But it was comedian/philosopher Mel Brooks who actually counseled his audience to “now thyself.” What better authority could you ask for?

The axiom “now thyself” is an endlessly intriguing one, made all the more popular these days by Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* franchise of books and tapes. It essentially suggests that the past and the future are distractions—the past is done, the future doesn’t exist—and the only reality that counts is what’s happening in the moment. Accepting that reality and being totally present to it empowers one to make more thoughtful and ultimately more effective decisions about life, work, and relationships. And so we need to give all of our attention to these moments, to cultivate self-awareness and awareness of what’s going on around us.

But there isn’t much time for *now* in the workplace, unless it’s an extension of the past or a bridge to the future. In the business world, to now oneself—to embrace and live fully in the present moment—goes against the grain of nearly everything one is taught about how to get ahead, work a customer, meet a deadline, and so on: analyze, strategize, dance on the head of a pin. In that world the mind

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is like a monkey desperately trying to stay ahead of some unseen menace. Slow down and you'll get eaten! Even as I type these words I find myself going faster and faster, fight or flight, missing keys, heart pumping, wondering what I'll tap in next. When life is a 24/7 marathon, moving so fast that to simply survive is triumph enough, embracing the present moment is a nearly hilarious notion.

## Inside-out, Outside-in

I recently heard a talk given by Hans-Peter Duerr, a nuclear physicist and former director of the Max Plank Institute for Physics and Astrophysics—a high church of science. He was describing the process in physics of breaking things apart into smaller and smaller pieces in order to find that one ultimate physical unit that will illuminate the source of all matter. It turns out, he noted wryly, that after decades of such finely tuned parsing, the best scientists in the world seem to have discovered...nothing. "Matter disappears," he said, "and only the relationship remains. This is the 'new physics.'"

How very interesting. It's the relationship between things that counts, not the things themselves, and that got me to thinking: If we were to organize our lives into both *being* states and *doing* states, into who-we-are moments and what-we-do moments, then it seems we spend most of our time doing and not being. Sure, our actions reflect at least some aspects of who we are, such as our creative interests or skill with numbers or wordsmithing acumen. But all of this doing—meeting deadlines, establishing goals, churning out products, and so on—represent the things of our lives, and we are more than those things. We are equally defined by our relationship to those things and our motivations for doing them, by our relationships with those we work with, and, perhaps most importantly, by our awareness of the thoughts and feelings we have as we move through the moments of each day. Such awareness can mean the difference between the constant drain of reacting to the things that arise from the conditioned mind and the empowering energy of acting from an inner *noetic* knowing.

The power of self-awareness is in revealing ourselves to ourselves, as honestly as we can, perhaps for the first time. It begins to reveal how our minds work, where our fears and desires live, who and what the buttons are. Self-aware people will often think twice before responding to a situation, taking a moment—nowing themselves—to better choose the right words or a wiser course of action. Over time, the self-aware person begins to develop a maturity and a personal ethic that is immune from outside influences, guiding their behavior and

keeping them grounded no matter the circumstance. "When you are unconscious," writes Let Davidson in *Wisdom at Work*, "you remain a mechanical victim of your own subliminal mental tendencies, painful habits, and counterproductive patterns. Heightened self-awareness reveals these habits and patterns, so that you can deal with them. You can accept them, let them go, or change them. Awareness gives you the choice to respond appropriately, to channel your power in the directions you choose." Or in the powerfully simple prose of Zen, "Serenity is not freedom from the storm but peace within the storm."

I remember standing in a crowd of people after having just been given the responsibility of coordinating a major national gathering of political activists. Requests, demands, advice, and congratulations were coming at me in waves, and I felt myself going under, trying to keep all of it in some semblance of control. A small but distinct voice whispered over my shoulder, "One thing at a time, one thing at a time," then everything suddenly slowed down and I was able to connect with an inner calm that helped steer me through the noise.

Similar to self-awareness, but more outwardly focused, is mindfulness, another tool for helping us to "be here now" and approach our work in a renewed spirit of engagement. In such an attentive state we make meaningful contact with our workplace surroundings: the stress—or joy—in a co-worker's voice, the "feeling tone" of a meeting, the integrity of a potential business client. It's a matter of training oneself to be alert and responsive. The complexity of the world around us deepens as new information starts flowing in; we feel more connected and involved. Tuning in to the deeper flows beneath someone's behavior helps us to make more insightful decisions about how and when to respond, or even if a response is called for. Over time, the practice of mindfulness can turn what might otherwise be just another ho-hum irritation into an opportunity for knowledge and compassionate response. Being this aware, this present, takes us out of our isolation and into direct relationship.

I know, it all sounds good in theory, but in the corporate world there is little time for the luxury of present-moment immersion. Efforts to slow down and smell the reality, to really get to know oneself, to *be* oneself, are easily undermined by the relentless pace of doing and deadlines. Meanwhile, a swarm of highly paid psychologists and consultants try to box us into movable pieces of personality shorthand. Forget the present moment, they say, we'll tell you who you are. In a spirited and sometimes subversive effort to harness the unruliness of personality in the workplace, these specialists come armed with tests and typologies designed to lubricate corporate

performance by simplifying those pesky complexities of humanness. Some of the more popular include:

## Meyers-Briggs

This is the most enduring system of psychological profiling, based on the pioneering work of famed psychologist Carl Jung and developed in the 1940s by the mother-daughter team of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs-Meyers. The system measures personality according to four specific areas:

- \* How a person relates to others (Extraversion vs. Introversion)
- \* How a person takes in information (Sensory vs. Intuitive)
- \* How a person makes decisions (Thinking vs. Feeling)
- \* How a person organizes their life (Judging vs. Perceiving)

The MBTI—the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator—identifies 16 specific types (ENFJ, ISTP, ESFP, and so on), each one with a dominant temperament. The Briggs never personalized the different types other than to discuss their general characteristics, but others have come up with such names as Mystic, Innovator, Helper, Realist, and so on.

## Big Five

The Big Five evolved from the work of Sir Francis Galton, a pioneer in the field of behavior studies who practiced more than 100 years ago. Galton was considered the first man to investigate individual personality differences scientifically. The Big Five basically draws from the research behind the MBTI model but moves away from “types” and toward actual personality traits. It identifies five key characteristics—Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience—each of which has six “sub facets.”

## Stress Personalities

Back in the 1970s, two social work professionals, Mary H. Dempcy and Rene Tihista, came up with a typology based on how we deal with stress. Each of seven basic “stress personalities”—the Pleaser, the Striver, the Critical Judge, the Internal Time Keeper, the Saber-Tooth, the Worrier, the Inner Con Artist—represents a particular behavior pattern. Each one reacts to and in many cases creates stress in its own unique way. One type will usually be dominant, but different personalities can surface depending on the circumstance.

## Enneagram

The Enneagram, characterized by one practitioner as “an ancient teaching of mysterious origin,” draws from the spiritual traditions of Sufism and Christianity. It was popularized in the West by the Eastern mystic G.I. Gurdjieff and modified over time by several others. Unlike such models as the MBTI and the Big Five, which are more focused on observable behavior, the Enneagram seeks to go deeper by classifying people according to their core motivation. There are nine basic personality types: the Reformer/Perfectionist, the Giver, the Achiever/Performer, the Individualist/Romantic, the Thinker/Observer, the Loyal Skeptic, the Enthusiast, the Leader/Chief, and the Peacemaker/Mediator. These types are further clarified by additional psychological patterning such as “compensating beliefs,” “coping strategies,” “driving energies,” and “traps.”

Is there a category for those of you who aren’t confused by all this! And while we’re on the subject...what’s your sign?

So you’re a JFTP, a Striver, the Rebel, the Pleaser, most of one thing and part of another. How is this supposed to help you? The study of personality can seem endless, the vagaries of “typing” as numerous as people themselves. Perhaps in this process we do gain some self-knowledge, some inkling of our conditioned psychological and emotional patterning. But however helpful these models may be, I believe that they fail to reveal the essence of who we are underneath the coping and the conditioning and the behaviors. They are mostly metaphors trying to capture a very subjective condition: our essential selves—the foundational ground of being that lies beneath all the surface layering. When you stand solidly in the moment and feel into what it is like to be you, only then do you begin to get a *real* sense of your deepest, most authentic identity.

## Hardwired for Choice

In their quest for the ultimate something, physicists discovered yet another remarkable anomaly: The very focusing of attention seems to affect the object of that attention (see Schrödinger’s Cat). This “mystery of entanglement” is confounding some of the best minds in science, while suggesting to the rest of us that what we think about *matters* (so to speak)—our thoughts have a literal physical impact on our environment and ourselves.

The notion of *neuroplasticity* affirms this. It suggests that our brains are capable of changing *at any age* in response to new learning, new experiences, and new behaviors. Further, the field of epigenetics,

made popular by Bruce Lipton, suggests that gene expression is not fixed; it, too, is affected by changes in our environment and our thinking. In short, we are not held hostage by our conditioning or our history; we are in fact designed for choice and change, and when we “now ourselves” we can begin to control our responses and behaviors and rewire ourselves in a direction of our conscious choosing. If we can accept that the present moment is the culmination of everything that preceded it, then would it not make sense to accept that the future will be shaped by that same moment? If this is true, then we best pay close attention to it.