



# Keep It Idling!

Thinking about Thinking – What Is/What Isn't Thinking?

Most people know Ken Jennings because he won 74 games and \$2.52 million on *Jeopardy*. There is something very intriguing about people who know a lot of facts – how do they do it? How smart are they really?

Or consider savants — *Wikipedia* describes savants as: “individuals with amazing skills and knowledge in selected fields: Most autistic savants have very extensive mental abilities, called *splinter skills*. They can recall facts, numbers, license plates, maps, and extensive lists of sports and weather statistics after only being exposed to them once. Some savants can mentally note and then recall perfectly a very long sequence of music, numbers, or speech. Some, dubbed mental calculators, can do exceptionally fast arithmetic. Other skills include precisely estimating distances and angles by sight, calculating the day of the week for any given date over the span of tens of thousands of years, and being able to accurately gauge the passing of time without a clock. Most autistic savants have a single special skill, while others have multiple skills. Usually these skills are concrete, non-symbolic, right hemisphere skills, rather than left hemisphere skills, which tend to be more sequential, logical, and symbolic. Why autistic savants are capable of these astonishing feats is not quite clear.”



We could also compare and consider Einstein and a current Graduate School level science student; the Graduate Student knows far more fact than Einstein did at his peak – who is/was smarter?

So, as with Jennings, Savants, Einstein and the Graduate Student, the questions are: How do they do it? How smart are they? How can intelligence be measured? What is the relationship between knowing facts and the ability to think? How important and significant to real life is all this?

We don't know whether people are smarter or dumber today than in the past because we simply do not have the perspective of being around people in history to evaluate this. We do know, however, that there is often little relationship between a person's (individual or collective) knowledge of facts and their intelligence – people can be “advanced” in knowledge while deficient in thinking. An example, in fairly recent history, is mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Germany; the German, then and now, was and is knowledgeable very advanced, but they, in failing to think, tragically followed a demagogue – they exhibited a savant-like disconnect between knowledge and thinking.

Simply put, there is a great distinction between knowing facts and thinking:

- **Knowledge** is the comprehension of *what/where/how/when* while
- **Thinking** focuses on understanding *why*.

Since knowledge is relatively easy to test and measure, while understanding is far harder to assess, we too often focus solely on the level of knowledge while ignoring the importance and development of understanding. It is interesting that Ken

*Confessions of a Trivial Mind* – he must

between anyone's (including his) grasp of many  
Thinking is coming to and looking over the  
what we don't understand and requires, if we are  
facts we know, work (ugh!). We are naturally



Jennings' blog is titled  
recognize the difference  
fact and thinking.

edge of all we know into  
to extend our use of the  
mentally acrophobic –

fearful of pushing to the “edge” into the unknown, which is required to understand something new. It is easier, safer and can be often more rewarding (people will think you smarter), spending time to learn more facts. Or like many, we can fall back on the clichés of opinions: “My opinion is as good as yours . . .” Opinions are appealing because they don’t require facts or thinking! And in a democratic society they have equal weight at the ballot box! We find as a consistent rule, however, that the more people think, the less they voice, use the term or depend on opinions because they understand opinions are of little or no value because they have neither a foundation of facts nor thinking – they are normally just the repeated catchy phrase or clichés of the unthinking and ignorant!

As foolish as it sounds everyone, at one time or another (hopefully less often than in the past), has had the fear of knowing the truth because, in having the fact and thinking, we may find an answer contrary to what we want to do or happen. A specific example of this common fear of thinking is in the area of maintaining and improving my health – even minimal research and thinking will inevitably lead to the necessity of exercise . . . I don’t want to exercise . . . so I won’t think!

But enough of foolishness, let’s get back to rational thinking. Learning more has little value apart from thinking – most people know far more than are capable of using in a thinking context. The *Bible* even points out more facts: “Knowledge puffs up.” <sup>1</sup> Corinthians 8:1 One well-thought out reason is better than knowing a thousand facts. Who has not been burned by the knowledgeable person fact-throwing without a rational context for the facts?



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## The Obstacles and Keys to Better and Improved Thinking

As in anything, there are positives that enhance and negatives that detract from the objective and development of a skill – thinking, likewise, has its friends and enemies.

A great potential friend to thinking (yet sadly, more often, effectively an enemy) is the undeniable and increasing avalanche of facts and “information” that bombards us today (I normally dislike the “boo-hoos” of how bad we have it these days – in most cases we don’t, but the information overload syndrome IS real!) – TV channels multiply, 24-hour “news” from many sources, a developing “blog” mentality providing facts, thoughts, opinions, foolishness and stupidity equal platforms – in a single generation, going from virtually all news being disseminated by and through local newspapers → radio → TV news (early 60s) → CNN (80s) → multiple cable “hard” and “soft-core” news → to the explosion of virtually unlimited access to information through the Internet.

The single greatest obstacle AND opportunity to keeping this flood of potential beneficial information from being a deafening noise is the quality of the filtering capabilities and training of the individual (see *In-Box Full? On Seeking E<sup>2</sup>* tab of [789GracePlace.com](http://789GracePlace.com)).

The old adage “Garbage in – Garbage out” has never been so relevant. Between the extremes of turning everything “off” and letting an open sewer flow in and through our homes and minds are the more reasonable skills of filtering – learning how to control input to that which is positive. It seems many parents work hard on this as it applies to their children without considering an equal or greater need for themselves – which is unfortunately consistent with how too many adults view disciplines (as being for children, not adults). Child disciplines should be a foundation for a life-long development of disciplines! There is an almost direct relationship between growth and maturity (mental, physical, spiritual . . .) and the development of disciplines. The “peak” does not have to be reached in the 20s or 30s – growth and development can be extended much further into life!

## Specific Obstacles to Thinking



**Busyness** and **worry**: Developing thinking skills is not just one more good thing we ought to do and worry about – done right, it will reduce busyness and worry! Busyness is usually the result of not properly planning and thinking and “Worry is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other

thoughts are drained.” Arthur Somers Roche

**Opinions** Reject clichés and wives-tales – don’t add to them! Opinions reduce mental flexibility and open-mindedness because, once vocalized, opinions tend to increase our vested interest in the opinion coming true and in repeating it again and again; accept, make and have fewer opinions!

## Catalysts to Thinking

Thinking is a discipline dovetailing back into life’s other “basic” disciplines. In fact, **thinking is the foundational discipline for all other disciplines** – thinking (like other key disciplines) builds order (though better focus) and hope (through a developing “picture” and resulting purpose).

At least a seed of **Order** – **Purpose** – **Hope** are necessary to think and they grow as, and to the degree, we think. Order should be the fruit of reducing busyness; hope and purpose blossom when worry is challenged and exterminated.

**Capturing small thoughts** is a key to building greater and larger thoughts. One of the big cheeses at Starbucks was recently asked, in an interview, why Starbucks is so successful compared to their competitors – his answer was the Starbucks is 10% better at 1,000 things. “Big” thinking is the same – capture and integrate many small ideas and thoughts into their lives. The mind is like a sieve or a trap – either letting many small ideas slip through and away or capturing, classifying and integrating them into a mosaic of wisdom.



Thinking, at least by normal people like us, will not result in far-out and exotic thoughts, but “Oh Yeah! Now I understand!” revelations useful in everyday life.

- Keep **paper and pen** ALWAYS and EVERYWHERE close at hand. Little thoughts come at unusual times – when driving or walking, in the middle of the night (these really drive you crazy if you don’t have paper and pen handy!), when talking or listening to others . . . little pads of paper all around allow you to “capture” and jot an idea down rather than lose it.
- **Be Liberal** in the best sense of the word – this means being open-minded and unafraid of new and challenging ideas. Embrace wise counsel
- **See ideas objectively** and separate from your personal self-interest. Don’t think so personally!
- **Observe and learn from the successes and failures of others. Read!**
- **Be “quick to listen, slow to speak.”** James 1:19

Thinking and developing the skill of better thinking takes an **investment of time** like all other disciplines, but it is an investment that pays and repays dividends over, and over again! Time can be a friend or enemy – investing in a worthwhile effort, like developing thinking skills, values time with the respect it deserves! Modeling good thinking skills is also invaluable to the development of thinking in children. Children raised in non-thinking homes can, later in life, learn this skill, but it is much harder and much time and potential benefit lost in the interim.



## When We Should Think

Thinking should become routine and second-nature, but especially when we have a decision to make we should take time, write down and organize our thoughts, even if no more than listing the pros and cons. Writing has the tendency and benefit of dumping thoughts from the minds (rather than keeping them going around and round) leaving room for additional thoughts and ideas to help in making good decisions and extending and building thinking; it allows for the linear development of thoughts from the normal “little circle” or worry.

So back to title:  
they are pretty and  
laws, Andrew, is a  
Computer Science,



*Keep It Idling!* My nieces have at least two things in common – they know how to pick good husbands. One of my nephew-in-Top-Gun Air Force Fighter Pilot, in Graduate School now for in short, very smart! Yet even as smart as he is, I have to

periodically remind him of what I have to remind myself of all the time – Keep It (the brain – think!) Idling! It is too easy to get to a point of comfort, in the “heart” of what we are most knowledgeable of, and “camp out” there; depending on our store knowledge to dazzle mostly ourselves. We can get by shuffling a few facts to make an adequate living; why engage in the real work and effort of thinking – why confront the fear and discomfort of trekking into the unknown to better understand *why*? Who cares why? Just those that want to develop this skill (and receive its benefits) for themselves and their children.

Think about thinking for a moment – haven’t you seen people (including yourself) who have gone looooooooooooooooooooooo periods without any meaningful thought? The danger is turning the brain off and then when we need it – forgetting it is off or not remembering how to turn it back on! Many, many people go months, years, decades without any real thinking and do not even recognize the problem – Keep your brain idling by exercising simple thinking disciplines!

Useful thinking is not for developing the next great invention, but in stopping the stupid mistakes we all make in acting without thinking or thinking immaturity based on feelings, opinions or even simply facts. I had rather be a poor thinker working on developing this skill than a person not even attempting to think – with their brain in the off position! Poor can become fair and later a little better and then maybe even good – but, in any case, any move up the chain of thinking is a positive!

