

The Kerdceran Way
Practicing the Art of Being Thoughtful
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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On the Sunday following the November 2016 national election I delivered a sermon during which I said, “we need to become a nation of critical thinkers, critical not only of what we are hearing from the biased, corporate controlled media, but also critical of our own beliefs, so that we can begin to tell the difference between genuine reason and rationalized emotions.” This is a belief I’ve held for many years, ever since I first began studying philosophy in college and learned the value of using reason to help prevent delusion, especially self-delusion. For, as my philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark commented on my first day of logic class, “People tend to think psychologically, not logically.” Thinking psychologically causes us to believe what we want to believe, or have been conditioned to believe, rather than what is reasonable to believe. Yet most of us think of ourselves as perfectly reasonable. When we’re able to simply list the reasons for our beliefs, that is, we feel we’ve made a logical, indisputable argument.

But listing reasons isn’t the same as reasoning. Thinking, which seems like reasoning to us, comes naturally, logic does not. Thinking thoughts is automatic. Thoughts and ideas sweep over us a spontaneously and effortlessly as our feelings do. Logic, Reason, Critical Thinking, which I use synonymously, is a learned discipline that takes continued practice and isn’t something we are usually taught during our public education, nor even as a necessary requirement of higher education. Yet, as I’ve often said over the years, I believe *we can solve most the world’s problems in a single generation if we begin teaching our kids critical thinking today*. In other words, if we begin teaching our kids *how* to think, rather than *what* to think, mainly by asking reasonable questions of themselves and others, many of the falsehoods and fallacies that have led to continued injustices in our world and to the destruction of our planet can come to an end and be prevented from happening in the future.

Just this week, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg testified before the U.S. Congress regarding how Cambridge Analytica, a data mining firm hired by the Trump Campaign, accessed the private accounts of more than 50 million Americans, presumably targeting them with ads and misleading information to influence their votes. A week earlier, we discovered Sinclair Broadcasting, which has snatched up most the nation’s local TV stations, has been sending out corporate news scripts for its local reporters to read in unison, scripts meant to increase our distrust of more reliable sources of information. As is the psychological nature of our thinking, many of us hear these reports, these implanted memes through the hacking of our communications network, including our local TV stations that reach millions of minds, and platforms like Facebook that has almost 2.5 billion users, a third of everybody, and we internalize them as our very own authentic thoughts. As Erich Fromm wrote in 1941, in response to what was happening in fascist Germany at the time, “Ask an average newspaper reader what he thinks about a certain political question, he will give you as ‘his’ opinion a more or less exact account of what he has read, and yet—and this is the

essential point—he believes that what he is saying is the result of his own thinking.”¹ This sad reality hasn’t changed much since then, though, today, our means of communication are far more sophisticated, including computer generated algorithms that not only target huge swaths of us at a time, but individually tailor information to manipulate each one of us.

This is why, during the aforementioned sermon, I expressed the urgent need for something I’d been imagining and developing for many years, “an International Organization,” I said, “that promotes and practices logic and emotional intelligence, so that more of us can more readily move into a place of executive function and empathic decision making.” The result is the Kerdcera Dojo, which will celebrate its first anniversary next month. *Kerdcera* is the hybridization of two Proto-Indo-European words meaning “heart” and “head.” *Kerd* is the ancient root of words like “core” and “kernel,” and *cera* is the root of words like “cerebellum” and “cerebral.” Although it’s been dead thousands of years, the Proto-Indo-European language is the origin of most languages on Earth today, which reflects the Kerdcera Dojo’s commitment to becoming a global presence.

Since last May, an average of twelve to sixteen of us have met weekly on Tuesday nights to practice logic and emotional intelligence techniques. I’ll say more about what this looks like in a moment, but first, why do we call it a dojo? *Dojo* comes from the Japanese word meaning, “place of the way,” in reference to places where people practice martial arts like *Aikido*, the Harmonious Way, or *Judo*, the Gentle Way, or *Iaido*, the Prepared Way, or *Budo*, the Warrior Way, and so on. The Kerdcera Dojo is a place for practicing certain techniques, using the martial arts model of learning by repetition. It involves serial learning, not sequential learning, through a punctuated, nonlinear style, meaning it isn’t necessary for Kerdcerans to attend every meeting, or for newcomers to worry they’ve missed too much and won’t be able to catch on.

Like martial arts schools, what we practice is an *Art* or *Way* of living. The Kerdcera Way practices *The Art of Being Thoughtful*. Like *Kerdcera*, the word *thoughtful* implies both mind and heart, both logic and Emotional Intelligence. Whether we tend to think things through or are known to be kind and compassionate, we are said to be “thoughtful.” It’s a term that implies both Executive Function (the ability to consider the consequences of our potential actions) and empathy (the ability to be considerate of others), and is, thus, synonymous with *Kerdcera*.

Hence, the Kerdcera Dojo is committed to helping create a world in which people are more thoughtful through the practice of logic and Emotional Intelligence. Its purposes are to help us disentangle empirical reality from our emotional biases, to recognize when our thoughts are driven mostly by our feelings, to become more aware of our own emotional states and more attuned to those of others, to create a culture in which the use of unbiased reason becomes the norm, and people consider the impact their decisions and actions might have on other people, other creatures, and on the Earth.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 215.

Since our practice-based learning makes us, by definition, practical, the kind of logic Kerdcerans practice during our meetings is rudimentary and informal. It mostly involves parsing out the propositional statements in an argument, then determining if they have a logical relationship; if, that is, some serve as premises and some as conclusions. A propositional statement is a statement that asserts, or proposes, something is true, like *Socrates was a man*, or *Molecules are bonded with bubblegum and paperclips*. Although propositional statements aren't always part of a logical argument, all logical arguments are composed of propositional statements, some of which serve as premises, and some as conclusions. Learning to distinguish which, if any, do so, and if their relationship is sound, is pretty much all the theory one needs to practice logic in the Kerdcera Dojo, and in life. The popular 20th century philosopher, Bertrand Russell once wrote, "If you wish to become a logician, there is one piece of advice I cannot urge too strongly, and that is: Do NOT learn the traditional form of logic."² (Russell wrote the word, "NOT," in all caps, which, for anyone in the White House who might be listening, means it's a pretty important statement.) Russell can rest assured Kercerans aren't learning logic in the traditional way.

What makes our practice especially unique, however, is that we recognize the importance of combing reason with Emotional Intelligence. Again, as Bertrand Russell once said, "The training of the emotions is as important, in the making of a philosopher, as training of the intellect."³ Most of us consider the duality of mind and body, of thinking and feeling, as common sense. Russell says, "Philosophers, however, usually dislike dualism."⁴ In the Kerdcera Dojo we not only combine logic and Emotional Intelligence, we propose they must go together because we don't assume the duality of heart and mind. We presume, rather, feelings and thoughts are part of one event, that thoughts create feelings, and feelings create thoughts.

I'll say more about this in a bit, but first I want to point out a paradox we are dealing with. Formal logic is 2300 years old and is complex and difficult to learn. Distilling it down to a few essentials that can, for the first time in history, make it practical and accessible to everyone is a challenge. Emotional Intelligence, on the other hand, is relatively new and is simple to grasp, yet, so far, remains mostly theoretical, with few techniques for putting it into practice. So, our challenge is to boil logic down to a few basics while expanding upon Emotional Intelligence, by adapting and creating techniques of our own.

Emotional Intelligence, in short, is one of the six kinds of intelligences discussed in psychologist Howard Gardner's 1983 book, *Frames of Mind*, introducing his groundbreaking theory of multiple intelligences, suggesting there's more ways to be smart than just having a high IQ. Emotional Intelligence includes five areas of emotional competency—self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. In brief, an emotionally intelligent person has well developed Executive Function, meaning one is able to think before acting, and empathy, meaning one feels for others and is considerate of their welfare.

² Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 38.

³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

This is why we begin every meeting with an Emotional Intelligence check-in, responding to the question, “How do you feel?” Each practitioner responds by noting the primary emotion that most closely describes how one is feeling in the moment—anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, or surprise—or else states that one is feeling content, indicating a period of emotional neutrality and equilibrium. Because, as we have learned, emotions and thoughts go together, our EI check-ins often include a brief narrative explaining why one is feeling the way one does.

After our check in, we begin our Primary Technique, a six-step process that, again, combines Emotional Intelligence with logic, heartwork with mindwork. Participants are presented with an argument, usually one regarding current events—letters to the Editor are often ideal—controversial enough to illicit an emotional response. The reason for this is so we can practice while experiencing strong feelings. After briefly examining the argument, we break into small groups of three or four, during which participants begin with another EI check-in, this time acknowledging their emotions around the topic. The next step is acknowledging one’s ideological biases, whether one agrees or disagrees, even before looking at it logically. These are often the two most difficult steps, because ideas so quickly impact us emotionally that we want to jump right into the argument, into stating why we agree or disagree with it. But the entire point of our work is to own our emotional and ideological biases, so we can be more honest with others and with ourselves about the unconscious origins of our beliefs.

Hopefully, in owning our biases, we can affirmatively answer the next question, “Are you open to changing your mind if it seems reasonable to do so?” Sometimes we’re so convinced we’re right that it’s hard to answer this question because it *feels* unimaginable anything is going to change our minds. But if we can’t answer this question affirmatively, it’s almost pointless to go on with the technique, which is about being objective enough, and self-aware enough, to let our beliefs stand or fail on their own merits, without our biased, hardheaded, unyielding defense of them.

It’s only then that we move forward, logically considering the argument by identifying its propositional statements and determining which, if any, serve as premises or conclusions. Last week, for example, we considered an argument Bill Maher made on his HBO show defending Fox News host, Laura Ingraham after David Hogg, a survivor of the Parkland, Florida, high school shooting, called upon advertisers to boycott her show for unfairly ridiculing him during an interview. “Okay, maybe you shouldn’t say that about a 17-year-old,” Maher agreed, “but again, he is in the arena and then he calls for a boycott of her sponsors. Really? Is that American? He complains about bullying? That’s bullying. I have been the victim of a boycott of sponsors. I lost a job once. It is wrong...” As you might guess, this stirred up a lot of emotions. Although most expressed a like of the politically incorrect host, we disagreed with him on this issue, which made for a lively conversation.

As we moved forward with step five, determining the soundness of his argument, we determined Maher had committed the fallacy of equivocation, mainly by defining boycotting as a form of bullying, as well as the 1st Amendment with the right to have advertisers. His logic was actually valid; If calling for a boycott is bullying, and David Hogg called for a boycott, then David Hogg is bullying. Simply substituting Hogg’s name with Dr. King’s, however,

shows the problem. If calling for a boycott is bullying, and Dr. King called for a boycott, then Dr. King was bullying. The argument has a valid form but is ultimately unsound because equivocating boycotting with bullying is a false equivocation. Boycotting, rather, has been a useful method in gaining 1st Amendment rights, not suppressing them. We also recognized, though he felt he was being perfectly logical, that Maher's opinion on this was tainted by his own feelings around having once been boycotted himself.

After all of this, we end the primary technique with another EI check-in, how do you feel? This is important because, between our first EI check-in at the start of our meeting, and the two taken during our primary technique, our emotions may have shifted several times. I'll say more about this in a moment, but first, after our Primary Technique, Dr. Candace Schmidt, a practicing psychologist and member of our congregation, leads us in an Emotional Intelligence exercise, often pertaining to a certain emotion, to help us work on self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, empathy, or social skills. (In case you're wondering, the subtle difference between self-control and regulation is self-control is about not reacting to our feelings in ways we might regret, and self-regulation is about shifting from one mood to another. Simply taking time out to breath is a good way to do both.) Dr. Schmidt, who is a co-leader with me in this effort, may use breathing, guided meditation, music, imagery, video clips, play, and other mediums in these exercises. Last week, for example, practitioners were given a list of seven scenarios, like one about a fellow who gets turned down for one date and concludes, "No one will ever want to go out with me again." We then discussed which pattern of thinking his negative feelings about this incident led to. In this case, we agreed he *overgeneralized* based on one experience, something many of us tend to do.

After almost a year of meetings we've discovered much about about ourselves and about the interconnection between our thoughts and feelings. One of our underlying premises going into this work is, again, nonduality, that thoughts and feelings are part of the same event. For example, the EI check-in may seem a simple matter of just stating what we are feeling—anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, or surprise—but it is difficult not to also want to explain our feelings, to conceptualize them by wrapping them in narrative. Some of us even begin our EI check-in by first stating, "I think," rather than, "I feel." Like most of us, we have an emotional response to an idea that enters our conceptual environment, and the first thing we do is express our thoughts, not our feelings, about it. Most of us are unaware that we're even having an emotional response because the feelings express themselves as ideas, causing us think we're being reasonable. It's an incredible relief, however, to let go of this tendency to rationalize our emotions and just own the feelings beneath our ideas, to just let them be.

Another thing we've learned is that our emotions are constantly changing, often in response to what I now call, "the conceptual sea we swim in." We don't often recognize it, but our environments, through conversations, advertisements, radio, TV, books, papers, magazines, the random chatter of our own minds, are filled with ideas moving in and out of our awareness, like schools of fish briefly snatching our attention before dashing away. They seem like ideas to us because feelings come dressed in thoughts, and they cause us to react with ideas of our own, even though, beneath the surface, they are really provoking emotional reactions. Again, we find over the course of just a few minutes of several EI check-ins, that our feelings shift, often dramatically, in response to the ideological arguments we are

considering in our dojo. It's often difficult for us not to get swept up in the argument, emotionally committed to proving our own opinions right, forgetting our purpose is to remain self-aware and objective so we can consider arguments on their own merits.

The most exciting finding, however, which I think is a unique discovery of the Kerdcera Dojo, is that our emotions have an *ideological signature*. Dr. Schmidt sometimes uses the term, *biological signature*, to describe the physical changes our bodies go through during an emotional event, like changes to our facial expression, body language, blood pressure, heartrate, body temperature, and so forth. In the same way, we've found that feelings often express themselves to us as thoughts justifying themselves, similar to how feeling startled may cause us to abruptly use a curse word. Because we experience our feelings as thoughts, however, we tend to think we are being perfectly reasonable, unaware that we're even having an emotional event until it has passed, if then. It makes me wonder how much of our social and political problems, of what goes on in Washington and is going on in the world today, is happening because of rationalized feelings that we mistake as reasonable thoughts? It makes me wonder how much better life might be if more of us could strip the narrative enshrouding our emotions and deal with them, appreciate them, and own them on their own merits? What would it be like if our leaders could recognize and cope with their feelings of anger and anxiety, rather than justifying them with made up reasons they think sound logical? That's what the Kerdcera Way is about, not controlling or suppressing our emotions, but fully embracing them through self-awareness and honesty.

Some have an emotional reaction to the word *logic* itself, leading them to think it is cold, calculating, and without heart of spirit. But I think and feel, it is illogic that causes us to behave without compassion, without considering the consequences of our actions or their impact on others, and it is logic, the ability to recognize our emotions and examine the thoughts they provoke as honestly and objectively as we can that leads to compassion. Indeed, it is such compassion that really makes the Kerdcera Dojo a success, and why so many have remained committed to participating each week for almost a year, because of the strong sense of friendship and community it has created among us. Through sharing our feelings, our minds, and our fallacies among supportive friends, all seeking to grow and better understand ourselves, we have created something remarkable, something I hope during the next year we can take to the next level by beginning to establish Kerdcera Dojo's elsewhere and everywhere. In the meantime, I hope the work we're already doing can be a source of inspiration and insight for our entire church community as we work together to better understand ourselves and to make the world a better, more thoughtful place for everyone.