

THE  
DAVIS FOUNDATION  
FOR PROVIDING  
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of December 15, 2004

Dear Reader,

We would all like to be excellent at what we do, but how can we achieve this? For some people it appears to happen easily and naturally. Others may work diligently to improve their performance, and some drive themselves relentlessly. And there are those who simply resort to fantasies of stellar performance or who distract themselves in order to avoid making an effort.

One man's excellence is described in a recent *New Yorker* article (12/6/04 issue) by Atul Gawande, titled "The Bell Curve." It has been found, in medicine, that the performance of doctors and hospitals follows a bell curve in which the great majority are average while small numbers are poor or excellent. Most think that they would fall at the excellent end of the curve whereas in reality most are in the middle.

The efficacy of the treatment of cystic fibrosis has been especially closely studied. Pioneers in its treatment have discovered new techniques that extend patients' lives by many years (from early childhood to adulthood), and these new techniques have been adopted by many cystic fibrosis treatment centers. It appears that although all of the centers use the same treatment protocols, their results follow the bell curve. Most are clustered in the average portion while a few yield much better results than the rest. Why?

The author, a surgeon, visited the top-ranked center and observed its leader at work. The doctors at other centers are hard working, conscientious, caring, and invested in their patients, but this man is in a class by himself. He is intensely focused on cystic fibrosis and innovative in devising new treatment methods and equipment. He does not accept failure, but responds to any decline in a patient's lung capacity, no matter how slight, by relentlessly investigating the cause and inventively augmenting the treatment regimen. Though elderly he is energetic and forceful.

This doctor's focus is good for his patients, but is it also good for him? Is his intensity a *partial* or a *true solution*? Focus as a partial solution develops in response to a chronic disequilibrium. Suppose that this man had been ill as a child and, as with cystic fibrosis patients, burdened by physical limitations and the necessity for elaborate treatments? One possible partial solution would be for him to strive to overcome his illness by becoming a doctor and finding a cure. If he found that he was good at his studies, that gratification might lead him to focus ever more intensely on them. Although he would enjoy his work, he wouldn't be performing it for the sheer pleasure of it but would feel pushed because of the underlying need. And the chronic disequilibrium would create "mental static" that would compromise his creative capacity.



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Focus as a true solution occurs when a person receives intense gratification from an interest or a talent and is stimulated to pursue it passionately. Further knowledge or accomplishment is rewarding and evokes the desire for yet more. Although an individual may have chronic disequilibrations occurring from other causes, he will be free of them in his area of concentration. If others have reached his level, he may feel competitive with them. If his competitiveness derives from chronic disequilibrations it may be debilitating but if it is evoked simply by the stimulus of other talents it can be energizing. Michelle Kwan, the skater, has said that she enjoys the competition in important events because it stimulates her to skate even better.

A talent that leads to superior accomplishment engenders a sense of autonomy. The individual is not dependent on others for his performance or for the source of his gratification. Because it is internal he is independent and confident. The cystic fibrosis specialist who is at the top of his field disregards certain rules and regulations at times. He does so not because of laziness or rebelliousness, but because these rules occasionally interfere with his patients' best interests.

The author is concerned about the implications of mere average performance in vital occupations such as medicine and wonders whether it is inevitable that only a few will achieve the superior performance exemplified by the cystic fibrosis specialist. That doctor's excellence occurred spontaneously, but we know that there is a way for everyone to achieve at the highest level: by developing an Inner Guide.

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*QUESTION:*

Do you think that the self-hypnotic state would cause changes in the brain receptors that influence relaxation and that its influence on the brain could be seen by one or more imaging techniques?

*ANSWER:*

I do think that the self-hypnotic state causes some alteration in physiology. I personally have experienced the temporary amelioration of allergic symptoms while in the self-hypnotic state but I don't know what the underlying physiological changes are. No imaging studies have been done yet on self-hypnosis as we practice it. I am not aware of imaging studies on the meditative state though they may exist. If anyone knows of such studies, I would appreciate hearing about them.

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The board members of the Davis Foundation wish you a peaceful and comfortable holiday season.

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I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at [info@davis-foundation.org](mailto:info@davis-foundation.org). If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

*Judith M. Davis*

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