

# Trivial Pursuit



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Dear Johnnie;

In the medieval university from which modern liberal education has evolved, the Trivium subjects of grammar, logic and rhetoric were intended to establish an intellectual foundation to support good citizenship and excellence in any field. The upper division Quadrivium subjects of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music were built on that foundation. This systematic approach to the development of knowledge and intellect yielded the Enlightenment, the scientific enterprise, the Industrial Revolution and the

Internet. The world has become considerably more complex in the last few centuries and liberal education is under suspicion; largely on economic grounds. You need some practical training that leads to a gainful career, but the development of your intellectual capacity bears independent attention in the service of that end. That's why you are here.

In Zen, enlightenment is ultimately about posture and breath. In principle you could go straight there; but most people require encouragement, guidance and training. This is also the case in martial arts, music, medicine, literature, mathematics, computer programming, finance, philosophy, psychotherapy and law. Because totalitarian states and cults have manipulated intelligent people in horrific ways by training them how to think, liberal democracies make a point of not doing that. Do not expect to find *Effective Thinking & Phenomenological Reasoning* in your curriculum. The Trivium subjects remain as intellectual fundamentals, but they provide only the syllabus and not the cognitive style you must acquire in order to bring it to life. It is important to develop an accurate intuition of how your brain, your mind and your environment collaborate to think on your behalf; and how to manage that process in your education and in the world. Let's talk about your situation in this context. Trust me. Call me.

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# Intuition, Creativity and Aesthetics



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**I**ntuition is one part of yourself making suggestions to another part, generally without explanation. What you are aware of as your conscious self is really just a tiny subset of what goes on inside your head. Consider what suggestion a cat's whiskers might give to their cat about whether to proceed into that narrow space. The kitty doesn't need to know trigonometry, the width of its hips or the consequences of getting stuck in a pipe to benefit from the intuition that arises from the simultaneous stimulation of whiskers on both sides of its face. This intuition means

*"Don't crawl into that pipe, Kitty!"* Most of the cats that ignored this intuition in the past are dead. This simple reflex suggests how intuition works at higher levels.

Once you have invested the necessary hours to master any discipline, regardless of its scope or scale, you can expect to have intuitions that reflect what you have learned in that domain thereafter. Note that intuition encodes everything you learn regardless of whether it is right or not, so intuition also institutionalizes errors, mistakes and delusions along with wisdom. Intuition is effortless and it frees you from having to reconstruct everything from first principles repeatedly; so you can build on what you have learned. Creativity is intuitive, almost by definition. You can invite your intuition to generate surprising new alternatives from among which you can select those that are interesting but not too crazy. Intuition is only a good thing as long as your critical reasoning and judgment are intact and activated. Intuitive judgments about the quality of your own intuition are *aesthetics*, which inform you about what you think is good and right without your having to know why you think that. Intuition is a sharp sword with two edges. Pay attention to how you wield it. Trust me. Call me.

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# Harvesting Creativity



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**I**t is impossible to tell whether another person is being creative or not. It is difficult enough to tell whether you are being creative yourself. This is because the essence of creativity is surprise and the invisibility of origins. What is taken for creativity can be merely the repetition of something that was creative in the past, or that was learned elsewhere. Think of the aging pop star singing his only hit from 40 years ago, for the zillionth time. Even the most original works can morph into platitudes. This is not to disparage creativity but

rather to exalt it by setting it apart from its relics and imposters. In addition to its many practical and aesthetic benefits, creativity is thrilling.

At the most basic level creativity is not a systematic process, although it can be systematically cultivated. Beneath the surface of consciousness lies an enormous bubbling stew of constant neural and glandular activity; a mob of impressions, thoughts and impulses, all high on various endocrinal drugs. Some of these subconscious sirens sing in distinctive voices. There are among them geniuses and idiots, devils and saints, muses and gorillas; all clamoring for our attention. To dwell there is insanity, but it is from this babbling chaos that creativity emerges. We can watch this cacophony from above and impose some unexpected order on it, as though our unconscious were a Rorschach inkblot that we can interpret and render according to our craft and disposition; which it is. If the result surprises and delights us, then we experience it as creative and we get the rush of exhilaration that we seek. Creativity can be intentionally cultivated and harvested. Trust me. Call me.

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# Herding Cats



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Imagine your brain as a vast range of convoluted cortical hills stretching into the distance before you, upon which a multitude of intelligent cats wander aimlessly, thinking their individual feline thoughts, each seeking some higher purpose. Note the random patterns in which the cats freely roam. The hills represent your ideas, your desires and your intentions. The activity of the cats on each of these hills is your brain, thinking about those things.

As you survey your cognitive terrain from the high vantage point of your prefrontal cortex, you cast the bright spotlight of your attention on one thematic hill after another, according to your evolving interest and intention. The cats are attracted to the spotlight and their aimless wanderings are drawn into patterns that are increasingly focused on the objects of your attention. They continue to think about those things on your behalf, for a while, even after you have turned your attention elsewhere, drifted into a dream, turned on the television or fallen asleep. Your brain continues to expend metabolic energy at about the same rate around the clock, regardless of what you think you are doing, and all of those neurons are thinking about *something* with that energy.

If you are thinking systematically, and if you reanimate each thematic cat hill periodically with provocative new thoughts and your attention, I think you can maintain about 5 parallel thought processes (plus or minus 2) around the clock without any particular stress or strain. Few people habitually think this way, although I recommend it for you in your particular situation. This description is not entirely fanciful. Neurons fire in groups and that is how you think. Trust me. Call me.

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# Concise Personal Counseling



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**I** love working through a wide range of situations with people and I have found that most issues can be resolved over the course of a few weeks or months. My sessions are about 70 minutes because that's how long a complete conversation usually takes. I don't intend to see you for nearly as long or as often as you think, and you might be surprised at the range of things I will want to talk about. Your life is a lot more than your presenting complaint. A limited series of focused discussions can be very productive and I would like to have a few of them with you. I will bring a wide

range of academic, clinical, business and personal experience to our conversations.

### **You have not yet called me because:**

- You can work through the situation on your own and with the other people you already have available, as you always have.
- You are not sure what you are going to tell me you are calling about.
- You suspect that I might endlessly rehearse your dysfunctional thoughts, feelings and behavior rather than productively exploring your relationships, business, capers, aspirations, strategies and tactics for getting what you want by working with the complicated people who surround you.
- You fear the cost of my conversation, which is \$175 per 70-minute session. I don't take insurance but I can give you a super-bill if you are prepared to suffer the indignity of a formal diagnosis.

Over a short series of productive sessions I can probably add something significant to the resolution of your unique situation. Trust me. Call me.

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