

What Brings Out the Best In Tess?

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What brings out the best in Tess?

What situations, what activities, what tasks, what expectations, what tones of voice, what people, what kind of people? All in all, what **contexts** bring out the best in her?

What do we mean by “the best?”

Well, for instance, what brings out the intelligent person in Tess? Please note that I am **not** asking “how intelligent is Tess.” Fascinating question, but entirely different. What tasks, what challenges, bring out the intelligent person in Tess? Because everyone has inside them an intelligent person and a stupid person, and different tasks will bring out one or the other. We’re all different. Even a person with severe intellectual impairment has some thing that leads the people who know them well to say, “Peter may be severely retarded, but when it comes to _____, he’s really smart.” What fills in that blank? Well, whatever it is, we should do more of it with Peter.

What brings out the gentle person in Tess? No one is violent one hundred percent of the time, and no one is gentle one hundred percent of the time, at least not inside, not in their heart. We all have within us both gentleness and anger. Even Saint Francis of Assisi, the very exemplar of gentleness, would have assured you that sometimes he had violence in his heart. But different contexts will bring out the gentle side or the violent side from within us, and for different people, different contexts will have that effect. What brings out the gentle person in Tess?

Another example of “the best:” what brings out the good attention span, the good engagement and focus, in Tess? Psychologists sometimes will assert, based upon observation and testing, that a person’s attention span is x minutes or seconds. What a foolish thing to say! Obviously, it depends on what we are inviting the person to pay attention to!

We know this from our own lives, right? Let’s look at me and my wife. When it comes to watching a Red Sox game on television, we know from careful observation over a period of years that Jack’s attention span is over three hours, devoted, attending, hardly moving. Unfortunately, his wife Sandy’s attention span watching the Red Sox is well under one minute. Almost immediately, and seemingly involuntarily, Sandy will pick up a book or wander to another room. So we can conclude that Jack has a long attention span, and Sandy has a short

attention span, right? No-- it depends on what we are asking them to pay attention to, we know this. Same for anyone else. The constructive question is, what brings out the good focus and engagement, and let's do it more often (and let's hope it is something more constructive than watching sports on television).

Now, I am not at all denying that one person might be, on average, more intelligent than another, or more gentle, or have a longer average attention span for more tasks. The problem is, it's not **useful** for planning to know that. What really is constructive, directly usable by families and teachers and support staff, is to figure out what brings out the gentle person, and then do more of it. What brings out the good focus and engagement, and then do more of it. It's awfully hard to change a person, and we don't have (and maybe should not have) much control over that. But the people around Tess do have lots of control over the contexts which can be created or shaped around her—and they will bring out different sides of Tess.

Human services and special education often seem to be cursed with what I would call an “assessment mentality.” How much of some good quality (like intelligence or gentleness or attention) does this person have? Far more constructive, usable, practical, is to ask what contexts bring out whatever portion of that good quality the person has? Everyone has some of that quality—what brings that out?

Another example: is Tess a good worker? Worthless question. Haven't all of us had at least one job that we only did the minimum to not get fired? And I hope we have all had the opportunity to have a job in which you were doing it for more than just the paycheck. So are you a good worker? Depends on the work, the expectations, the people around you, right? Same thing for Tess—what contexts would bring out the good worker in Tess?

How would we know what brings out the best? Purely empirical. Look back over the past days and weeks: what is the track record? When recently have we seen Tess sharp, intelligent, even analytical? Okay, what was she doing? With whom was she working? Where? What time? Look back again: when have we seen Tess engaged, focused, really “in her element?” With whom was she working? On what? Under what expectations? Discern the patterns. And then set up to do more of that.

What kind of work would bring out the good worker in Tess? With what kind of expectations? Under what kind of supervisor? Team work or individual work? Quiet or noisy work setting? Working with materials or working with numbers or working with people? And then, whatever it would be, let's set that up for Tess's job. We don't need to know an IQ or any other quotient or number or average; we need to know Tess, what brings out the best in her.

Note that this question, what brings out the best in Tess?, is not the same thing as asking what are Tess's interests, or what does Tess enjoy? There are some things in life that we surely enjoy, but they are not what bring out the best in us. For instance, almost everyone enjoys drinking beer and watching television, but we would hardly put either of those on the list of what brings out the best in us—what brings out the intelligence, the focus, the good character. And, conversely, there are some things in life that are not at all fun, but which **do** bring out the best in people. For instance, caring for a person you love who is having a hard time—perhaps a parent or grandparent whose health is declining, or a child who is ill—that's not at all fun, but it does bring out the best in most of us. Thank God.

So, to me, that is the most important planning question with and for an individual, and it has scores of very specific and usable answers. Very practical. What brings out the worst in Tess—and let's try not do that any more. And what brings out the best in Tess—and let's build more of that into her life.