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T(r)IC(k)S #14: **The Esteem Octopus II**

A poignant story I learned in the course of my undergraduate studies described a number of blind men engaged in experimentation and discussion around a single elephant. Each, upon grasping a different piece of the elephant (ears, trunk, tail, tusk) decreed that he alone had discovered this animal's true nature. In isolation, all were inaccurate; it was only through combining their observations that they could come close to appreciating the true nature of the creature.

Elephants don't really interest us here, though. Besides, pachyderm anatomy has already been well covered by those above-mentioned visually impaired fellows anyway. Our interest instead lies in an octopus. An Esteem Octopus, specifically. And just as a multitude of observations helped to reveal the elephant, we are feeling our way along this octopus inch by inch to better discern it. We started last time. Let's finish up –

☑ The difference between unhappiness and depression is one that actually registers now. I can be sad now! That sounds like an odd tentacle to rejoice, yet there are times when it is important and healthy to experience melancholy and I could never do so safely before. I instead quickly tumbled into extreme reactions and despondency. An important qualification I should make, however, is that the good Octopus does not shield you entirely from depression – it merely offers you more options. Depression is more about the sense of global helplessness and is not exclusively the dislike of self. It is therefore quite conceivable to be an effective, self-believing individual yet still flounder in a situation that has robbed you of control.

☑ Apologies for missteps can be offered quickly, and with greater ease. Surveying our foibles, and the consequences they bring us, only becomes threatening when we don't like what we see. So we minimize, we deny, we avoid, we project, we become angry and irrational, and we frequently kill the messenger – all this and more to avert our eyes from what internally causes us such insecurity. So many layers and issues simply melt away when your self-belief and the recognition that you've screwed up divorce. Having an Esteem Octopus does not make you immune to being wrong, but it does provide strength in owning up to it.

☑ Who you find attractive – and why – is altered. I can see the evolution of my own Octopus through each new partner I have: these days I can handle things in a relationship that my lack of personal strength used to cause me to crumble. At least as important as my choice of who to date is my choice of who NOT to date! This is a whole new question to consider: I never used to factor myself into the equation. As long as she was happy, well that's all that really mattered. There are many people out there who will alternately take advantage of this way of thinking and suck you dry, yet despite my dwindling resources (financial as well as mental!) it never would have occurred to me before to refrain from leaping on the next offer made. As of late, I've even chosen to end relationships *myself* when I decide it is not a good match for *me*. Wow.

☑ The converse is true as well – in other words, boy does this octopus know how to augment your appeal to others! People with qualities I never imagined would be within my grasp (“pedestal-people”) now not only look at me twice, but they now find me intriguing, attractive, and having a lot to offer them. Even more astonishing, I can handle what they offer in return and know what to do with it!

☑ It has become quite clear to me recently how the process of becoming acquainted with one's Esteem Octopus can be the precursor to leaving support organizations like the Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada rather



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than continuing as a volunteer. PART OF THE NATURAL GROWTH is to leave, and it is therefore important to do so. One adopts a new way of thinking and living when one has self-esteem, and it is most intoxicating. Our octopus friend is an addictive fellow! After he takes up residence, dwelling on old patterns is at first unsettling and dangerous and then becomes exceedingly hard to do. You may remember particular factual details, but the experiential memory – the emotional being – is forgotten. It is the oddest thing and sounds so improbable, yet it is undeniable. If pressed, I would submit that it must be a safeguarding function. The octopus’ arms grow thick and numerous, occluding the path back to darkness so that we may let it slip from our minds and embrace the contentment in this new place. Had I not gone into a health care field and made human service my life work, I would likely be gone by now myself, warmly enveloped away from support organizations in the love of my own Esteem Octopus.

I myself find it very important to occasionally elude my own Octopus, though, and still visit the places my mental anguish used to drag me to. Keeping that path periodically clear and maintained makes me more effective in leading people into the waiting arms of their own Octopi. One of my most valuable aids in this journey is a drawer full of Post-It notes, DayTimer pages, cardboard scraps, and paper plates which chronicle in jumbled snippets my adolescent and early adulthood misery over the years.

☐ There is, of course, always still plenty of room for growth and improvement. Recently a number of my friends congregated together for a group interview in preparation for an upcoming Reader’s Digest article about my life and work. I was not present, but learned later that each chastised me in turn for not coming to them when I’m low. “After all”, they said, “that’s what we’re here for”. I’m *allowed* to inconvenience them with my problems – I’m *worth* that. Hmm. I feel a new tentacle stirring.....

The true beauty of this Octopus is how the simultaneous operation of each appendage facilitates the operation of other components. For example, being more assertive may minimize the disheartening circumstances you find yourself in which would give you less stuff to sweat which would then help quiet your head thus clearing the desk for more socially aware interactions. All of which nurtures the growth of even more tentacles of your Octopus. What ultimately emerges is an orchestrated melody greater than even the sum of its impressive parts.....

I’d very much like to say that I came to know the many limbs of my own Esteem Octopus through my decade of post-secondary education. I’d like to.....but I can’t. I have simply recognized these changes in myself as they occurred and chose to record them in retrospect. How curious that after so many painful years of casting the net, desperately in need of some training in the intangibles, so many of these things just.....came. Came, that is, after inviting a certain cephalopod to move in. I suppose that synthesizing these changes in isolation, rather than developing the self-esteem that brings about these changes naturally, would be much like digging artificial water channels and hoping that you’ve approximated the route well as opposed to allowing the water to mold its own path naturally as it flows over the terrain. Water, like an Esteem Octopus, is a powerful force: either will eventually erode away any obstructions to its preferred direction anyway.

Cheers!

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